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MILTON'S STUDENT VERSES OF 1629

MS 770 in Lambeth Palace Library, entitled 'Notitia Academiae Cantabrigiensis' and probably compiled during the early 1680s, contains previously undiscovered information about the date and occasion of two of Milton's student Latin poems. First published in 1645, the poems are 'Naturam non pati senium' (That nature does not suffer old age) and 'De Idea Platonica' (On the Platonic Idea). The former has been variously dated to '1628-32?' (Carey, ed., Complete Shorter Poems (London and New York, 2nd edn, 1997), 63); '1628?' (Flanagan, ed., Riverside Milton (Boston and New York, 1998), 218); and as being 'composed while Milton was at Cambridge' (Revard, ed., Complete Shorter Poems (Chichester, 2009), 230). The latter has been dated to 'June 1628?' (Carey, ed., 68); '1628?' (Flanagan, ed., 220); and 'composed at Cambridge' (Revard, ed., 236). A more precise date now looks likely. LPL MS 770 fixes both poems to their occasion of delivery in Stuart Cambridge, the visit of Henry Rich, first earl of Holland (bap. 1590, d. 1649), Chancellor of the University, and Charles de l'Aubespine, marquis de Châteauneuf (1580-1653), French Ambassador from Louis XIII to England from 1629-30, in late September 1629. Milton was apparently invited by a Fellow of his college, Christ's, to write the poems for that Fellow to deliver during the public debate: such 'act verses', as they were known, encapsulated the argument of the prose oration and were often printed and distributed among the audience.¹ This new dating of these two poems is important for our understanding of Milton's student career: the story behind their composition suggests Milton already enjoyed a strong reputation as

¹ See also John Hale, Milton's Cambridge Latin (Tempe, AZ, 2005), 33-65.

a Latin poet (in Christ's, at least), and the occasion of their delivery implicates Milton, later, famously, a republican defender of regicide, in a royalist university showcase.

On pp. 238-9 of LPL MS 770, the date and location are given as follows: 'Sept. 24 [1]629 Publica Disputa[tio] habita ē in Scholis Philosoph[icis] coram Hen[ricus] Com[es] Hollandiæ Cancell[arius] Acad[em]i[ae] et. D[omi]nis Legatis'. Under the heading 'In Philos.' ('Questions in Philosophy') (p. 239), the Respondent is given as 'R. Jo[annes] Forster C[ollegii] Chri[sti] Soc[ius]'. John Forster (bap. 1604-1640), a native of Durham, was a Fellow of Christ's from 1626-1640.² A second late seventeenth-century/early eighteenth-century manuscript witness held in the British Library, MS Harley 7038 (97) corroborates the date of delivery (David Masson mentions the manuscript but does not associate it with Milton's poems: see Masson, Life of Milton (London, 1859), 1, 186). Harley 7038, compiled by the antiquary Thomas Baker, does not mention the poems and does not list all of the topics debated on this occasion, but among the information that Baker did include, the precise details of individuals who participated and questions that they debated are identical to those found in LPL MS 770.

Beneath the heading 'In Philos.' and under Forster's name, two questions to be disputed are given: 'Natura non patitur senium' (Nature does not suffer old age) and 'Peremptis singularib[us] perit natura Universalis' (Universal nature perishes when individual things die). A note on these two 'quaestiones' then follows, which mentions Milton and the two poems specifically:

De utrâq[ue] Carmina confecit J[ohannes] Milton[us], tunc Art[ium] Bacc[alaeus] in Coll[egio] Chri[sti] inter cui[us] Poemata extant p 60 et 63. In priorib[us] pauilla variatio ab illis, q[u]æ spargebant[ur] in Comitijs additis item 13 versiculis. Prior.a. Q[u]æstio tristiori sensu à Respondente, q[u]am q[u]o proponebatur, confirmata est; in q[u]o sc[ilicet] mortem præmatura[m] oppentente Natura non passa est Senium.

² Joseph Venn, Alumni Cantabrigienses (Cambridge, 1922-1954), II, 161.

(John Milton, then a Bachelor of Arts at Christ's College, wrote both poems; they appear in his 'Poems' on pages 60 and 63. In the former there is a slight variation from those verses which were distributed among the assembly, in that thirteen extra lines have been added. The first question was confirmed in a grimmer sense by the Respondent than that in which it had been proposed; in which, that is to say, by encountering premature death Nature does not suffer old age.)

The 'p 60 et 63' mentioned are the page references for 'Naturam non pati senium' and 'De Idea Platonica' respectively in the 1673 printing of Milton's Poems, &c. upon several occasions both English and Latin (London: Thomas Dring, 1673). The reference to the 'additis item 13 versiculis' in 'Natura non pati senium' is particularly intriguing: the poem is conspicuously longer than other act verses, and the obvious question is, if Milton added thirteen lines between Forster's oration and the 1645 publication, then which ones did he add?

The Lent term of 1629 (January 13-March 27) was Milton's last as an undergraduate, and he was declared Bachelor of Arts on 26 March 1629. In the autumn, Milton returned to Cambridge to commence his MA studies.³ Based on his likely involvement in composing these verses, we can suggest that he had returned to Cambridge in time for the Chancellor's visit. David Masson and Alan Nelson have suggested that he was present at the comedy written by Edward Stubbes, Fraus Honesta, performed on 24 September in the evening.⁴ Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns have argued persuasively for Milton's relative political conservatism while at

³ Gordon Campbell, A Milton Chronology (London, 1997), 38.

⁴ Masson, Life of Milton, 186; Nelson, 'Women in the Audience of Cambridge Plays', Shakespeare Quarterly, 41, 3 (1990), 333-336 (335).

university,⁵ and this composition of verses for a showcase staged for the benefit of Holland, Charles I's cavalier favourite, as well as for the marquis de Châteauneuf, suggests that Milton was not so doggedly averse to the monarchy at this early stage of his career as he would become during the interregnum.

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⁵ Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought (Oxford, 2008), 43.