

## Notes on selected Milton poems

Individual words whose meanings are unclear may almost always be found in the Oxford English Dictionary online.

### On the Morning of Christ's Nativity

10: **he wont** he used to

23: **star-led wizards** i.e., the Magi

24: **prevent** anticipate, get ahead of

64: **whist** silenced

74: **Lucifer that often warned them thence** the morning star (Venus), which sends the stars away when night ends

84: **axle-tree** chariot axle

89: **the mighty Pan** Greek god of Nature, oddly conflated with Christ here

100: **close** musical cadence

116: **unexpressive** Inexpressible. "Cherubim" and "seraphim" are different orders of angels

176: **Apollo** Greek God, whose oracle was at Delphos

186: **genius**; 191: **lars...lemures** Roman gods of places, households, etc.

197ff: **Peor...Baalim [etc.]** gods mentioned in the Old Testament; Milton goes on to mention other gods of the ancient Near and Middle East

### On Shakespeare. 1630

11: **Delphic lines** oracular lines

### L'Allegro

L'Allegro the happy man

2: **Cerberus** the hound of Hades ("Stygian cave," l. 3), in Greek mythology

10: **Cimmerian darkness** the Cimmerians are said by Homer to live at the edge of the world

12: **yclept Euphrosyne** called "Good spirit": the name of one of the Greek Graces

29: **Hebe** a goddess of youth

62: **dight** clothed, decked

**83: Corydon and Thyrsis (etc.)** names for shepherds in Greek pastoral poetry

**102: Mab** the Queen of the fairies (according to *Romeo and Juliet*). The following lines also refer to traditional fairy stories

**114: his matin rings** comparing the cock-crow to the morning peal of the church-bell

**125: Hymen** the god of marriage

**132: Jonson's learned sock** Ben Jonson, the Elizabethan and Jacobean poet and playwright, famous for his classical learning; the "sock" was worn by comedians on the stage

**136: Lydian** referring to one of the Greek musical modes

**145: Orpheus** mythical musician who used his music to convince Hades to give back his dead wife Eurydice (it didn't turn out well)

## Il Penseroso

**Il Penseroso** the melancholy man

**10: Morpheus** god of sleep

**23: Vesta** the goddess of the hearth

**24: Saturn** king of the Titans

**56: Philomel** the nightingale

**59: Cynthia** the moon

**87: outwatch the Bear** stay up until after the Ursa Major constellation sets (which it doesn't)

**88: thrice-great Hermes** not the God but the mystical (and possibly mythical) Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus

**109: him that left half told** Chaucer; the next lines refer to the unfinished Squire's Tale

**124: the Attic boy** a reference to a story about the dawn goddess Aurora ("civil-suited Morn") falling in love with a mortal

## Lycidas

**bewails a learned friend** Milton published this poem in a commemorative volume about his classmate at Cambridge, Edward King, who had died at sea

**foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy** because the poem, written in 1638, can now (in 1645, when the poem was printed with this headnote) be seen to have foretold the victory of the Puritans over the High Church party in the Civil War 1640–1660

**33: oaten flute** panpipes, a shepherd's instrument

**36: Daometas** another name out of the pastoral tradition

**54–55: Mona...Deva** Latinified names for English landmarks

**56: fondly** foolishly

**62: his gory visage** Orpheus, having lost Eurydice back to Hades, played such mournful music that a mob (“rout”) of Bacchantes tore him limb from limb and threw his head in the river Hebrus

**68: Amaryllis** yet another pastoral name, this time (like “Neaera”) for a woman

**73: guerdon** reward

**75: shears** in Greek myth, the Fates unwind each life like a piece of string, and a person’s death occurs when the Fate Atropos (here a “blind Fury”) cuts it

**77: Phoebus** Apollo, Greek God of the lyre (and of the sun)

**90: Neptune** Roman god of the sea

**92: swain** the drowned “shepherd” Lycidas

**100: bark** ship

**107: Ah! who hath reft** Camus is the river Cam, in Cambridge; “reft”: “taken away”

**109: pilot of the Galilean lake** in this infamously strange passage, St. Peter wishes some of the corrupt priests of the Anglican church had died instead of Lycidas. Makes a series of plays on the long-standing idea that priests are shepherds of their congregations (flocks)

**133: Sicilian muse** once more, a muse of pastoral (because one of the most famous Greek pastoral poets was from Sicily)

**176: unexpressive** inexpressible

### Sonnet 15

**the Late Massacre** the Duke of Savoy (in modern France, bordering Italy, under the Catholic Church—the “triple tyrant,” the “Babylonian woe”) massacred the Waldensians, a Protestant sect, in 1655

### Sonnet 19

**2: Alcestis** wife who, sacrificing herself to save her husband, was rescued by Hercules, son of Zeus (“Jove”)

**5–6: from spot of childbed taint / Purification in the old law** alludes to Old Testament practices of ritual cleansing for women after childbirth