

John Milton. Plaster, Gift of James Phalen, 1840.

This glowering bust of the English poet and polemicist, John Milton [1608-1674], has a fitting place at the Providence Athenaeum - an institution that has promoted the power of literature and spirited debate throughout its existence.

Milton's portrait is accompanied by nine other busts given in a single 1840 gift by James Phalen,¹ an exchange and lottery manager in Providence.² Three of the other busts also represent poets, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott and William Shakespeare.

The piece was donated at a time when educational institutions, such as the Athenaeum were in a frenzy trying to acquire bust portraiture. Owning busts of notable political, ideological and literary figures provided a way for these institutions to showcase their status.³ The bust of Milton and the other figures also serve as architectural elements at the Athenaeum, accentuating the tops of the wall-columns in the main room.

Unlike the busts of Byron and Scott, but like the bust of Shakespeare, Milton is depicted wearing the traditional attire of his time: a cloak, a shirt with a rectangular collar, and a wig.⁴ By choosing to show the poet in contemporary costume, rather than in a full ancient toga, the artist appears to have intended to keep Milton connected with his time period. Milton does, however, also wear a toga or sash over his contemporary dress. This juxtaposition suggests that Milton belongs in both worlds; he was influential during his time, but his literary accomplishments also connect him to the classical past. He was often depicted this way, including on a bust by John Michael Rysbrack on a monument dedicated to Milton in Westminster Abbey, where he is buried.⁵

Looking down at his viewers with a scowl, Milton appears austere in the Athenaeum bust. It is unclear precisely why he is portrayed so somberly, but this characterization is seen in many other portraits of the writer.

Milton is responsible for writing what is widely regarded as one of the greatest works of English literature, his epic, originally ten-volume poem about man's disobedience of God,⁶ *Paradise Lost* (1667).⁷ Milton, born in London, was educated at St. Paul's School, affiliated with the cathedral of the same name.⁸ He then attended Christ's College in Cambridge with plans to become a clergyman; his passion for literature, however, soon drew him to a new calling.⁹

In 1638 Milton traveled to Italy, where he met the astronomer Galileo Galilei [1564-1642] - then under house arrest for his controversial scientific ideas. This visit seemed to have a profound impact on Milton. Like Galilei, he became a freethinker, challenging conventional ideas of religion and politics and writing pamphlets opposing a state sanctioned church, advocating divorce, and supporting the execution of King Charles I.¹⁰ Towards the end of his life Milton suffered from

complete blindness, but still continued to write. He died shortly after publishing a second, twelve-volume edition of *Paradise Lost*.¹¹

Milton's influence was pervasive. His works influenced nineteenth-century Romantic writers like William Wordsworth and Mary Shelley, who both emulated Milton's poetic forms and themes in their own pieces.¹² The Athenaeum holds a number of John Milton's works, some of which are rare editions, including copies of *Paradise Lost*.

Not only does the institution own his works, they also embody his spirit. At weekly salon programs, visitors are encouraged to engage with literature, as well as learn from participating in lively debate and discussion. EW

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¹ *Report Made to the Providence Athenaeum at the Fifth Annual Meeting* (Providence, Rhode Island: Providence Athenaeum, 1840), p.8.

² Providence City Directory, 1840, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³ Nicholas Penny, "Bust," *Oxford Art Online*, 16 February 2015, accessed 10 February 2016, http://0www.oxfordartonline.com.helin.uri.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T012680?q=busts&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

⁴ "1600-50 in Western European fashion," *Wikipedia*, last modified 4 January 2016, accessed 20 February 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1600%E2%80%9350_in_Western_European_fashion.

⁵ "John Milton," *Westminster Abbey*, accessed 22 March 2016, <http://westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/john-milton2>.

⁶ "Paradise Lost John Milton Biography," *Cliffs Notes*, accessed 10 February 2016, <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/p/paradise-lost/john-milton-biography>.

⁶ "John Milton," *poets.org*, accessed 8 February 2016, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/john-milton>.

⁷ Albert C. Labriola, "John Milton" *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed 9 February 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Milton>.

⁸ "Paradise Lost," *Cliffs Notes*.

⁹ "John Milton," *poets.org*.

¹⁰ Labriola, "John Milton."

¹¹ "Paradise Lost," *Cliffs Notes*.

¹² Erdinc Durmus, "John Milton's Influence on Poets, Writers and Composers of His Period and Aftermath," *Mehmet Recep TAS*, p.58-9.