



“Lycidas” and the Pastoral Elegy

John Milton

Classical Pastoral



- Est. by Theocritus in Greek (3rd century BCE);
- Popularized by Virgil in Latin: *Eclogues*;
- Milton's use & adaptation= the establishment of poetic cred

2

SHEPHERD'S LIFE FOR ME

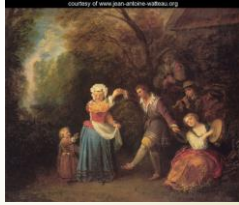


- idealized labour
- Carpe diem
- Note the nakedness—both a patriarchal sign and a figure for the “natural” openness and truthfulness of the country

4

Conventions THE GOLDEN AGE

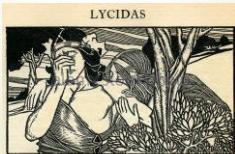
- Golden Age: a time of simplicity and perfection associated with the past
- Simple
- Innocent
- **Close to nature = close to Nature**



5

ELEGY

- Lyric (songs originally composed on a lyre): concerned with subjective experience of a moment;
- Lament for the dead;
- Proffers some means of CONSOLATION.



“

Ay me! I fondly dream—
Had ye been there—for what
could that have done?
(56-7)

”

THE QUESTION

Is the gift of poetry an adequate consolation for mortality and the capriciousness of nature?

Fame

Fame is no plant that lives on mortal soil,
 Nor in the glistering foil
 Set off to th'world nor in broad rumor lies,
 But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
 As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
 Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.

(78-84)

Justice

What role does justice (represented by Triton's court) play in the consolation for mortality?

Consider:

- ▶ "What hard mishap doomed this gentle swain?" (92)
- ▶ "They knew not of his story" (95).
- ▶ "It was that fatal, perfidious bark" (99).

Religion

- ▶ Old Camus (representative of Cambridge University, a Puritan counterpart to High Anglican Oxford):
- ▶ "How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,/ Enow of such as for their bellies sake / Creep and intrude into the fold!" (113-14);
- ▶ "And when they list, their lean and flashy songs / Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw" (123-4).

Pastoral Consolation?

Consider:

- "For we were nursed upon the selfsame hill" (23);
- The "whelming tide" and "monstrous world" (157-9)
- The mourning flowers (132-51);
- "Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise" (153).

Nature vs. nature

- What is the relationship between Nature and nature in the poem?
- What is the role of poetry in consolation for mortality?

Consider:

"So sinks the daystar in the ocean bed, / And yet anon repairs his drooping head /.../ So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high" (167-72).

Poetry

- the "oaten flute" and Shepherd's song
 - "Tempered to the oaten flute, / Rough satyrs danced" (33-4);
 - "That strain I heard was of a higher mood. / But now my oat proceeds" (87-88);

The last verse:

Thus sang the uncouth swain to th' oaks and rills,

...

At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue;

Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

(186-93)
