

Gwyneth Lewis

Letter To John Milton

Cardiff, April 2011

Dear Sir,

I met my English teacher from school last night at a book launch, and we talked about studying your masque, *Comus*, for A-level. Neither of us warmed to it – too much about chastity to make us really embrace the piece – but it occurs to me now that, in 1634, the masque must have been an equivalent of virtual reality today, and that the spectacle must have been a multimedia extravaganza, at the theatrical cutting edge. Mrs Osborne and I thought that we should probably have read the piece as science fiction and we would have loved it more.

You were my hero, though, once I'd read *Paradise Lost*. My wonder at the way you melded theology with politics and human psychology increased as I studied you at college, and did a special Milton paper for Finals. I was supervised by Geoffrey Hill, who made his students read you in seventeenth-century spelling and punctuation. I never did quite understand *Samson Agonistes*, but reading your political writings was a revelation. I'm still exhilarated by the passion of your rhetoric: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." No one ever lobbied more eloquently for permissiveness combined with the moral discipline not to be deceived by facsimiles of the good.

I fear that you would be sadly disappointed in the quality of political debate today. You were Secretary of Foreign Tongues to the Council of State from 1649 but had been publishing pamphlets arguing for radical freedoms stemming from parliamentary democracy for a number of years before that. It's as if Alistair Campbell had written a philosophical defence of socialism, rather than managing the reputation of a particular politician, and then his own career as a celebrity.

This isn't to mention the way you traced the drama of democracy right back to first theological principles and to the fall of Satan, before Adam and Eve appeared in Eden. In this sense, the only figures comparable to you in modern letters are Stephanie Meyers, author of the *Twilight Saga*, and Philip Pullman who, you'll be pleased to know, has written a preface to a new edition of *Paradise Lost*. Meyers is a practising Mormon. While her heroine Bella has been criticized by feminists for being too passive, I find the *Saga* as a whole to be a profound meditation on incarnation and its hazards as well as a moving love story. (I'm Team Jacob, by the way. If you don't know, it would take too long to explain.)

You're not fashionable at the moment and neither is the epic. The writer's writer of the seventeenth century is, rather, your erstwhile assistant, Andrew Marvell. I don't suppose that would trouble you. I saw on the television that your house is the most visited in the UK, which tells a different story. You would be interested in the way religion has become a contentious issue at the centre of intellectual debate. I'd like to see your arguments contra Dawkins and, equally, against advocates of Intelligent Design. As Marilynne Robinson (a Calvinistic novelist) has written, "Creationism is the best thing that could have happened to Darwinism." Your moral clarity on the pitfalls of loose thinking would be of great value to us now.

So, you're not forgotten. And if you could speak to us from the dead, I'd have one other question to ask, aside from guidance about contemporary attacks on religious faith, free speech and democracy. This one's personal: you were married three times and, though an advocate of divorce, you were widowed twice. How does the wife thing work in the afterlife? I'd love to know.

Hugs and kisses,
Gwyneth