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THE MILTON MESSENGER

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PLAGUE, POETRY & PANDEMICS

Some of the world's greatest art is haunted by plague, pestilence and pandemics - and none more so than Paradise Lost. *Published in 1667, following two of London's greatest disasters - the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666 - Milton's poem is one of the greatest works that rose from their ashes.*

Milton may never have survived to complete his epic masterpiece if he hadn't escaped from "the heat of the plague" in London to rural Chalfont St. Giles. There he stayed in that "pretty box", a farm-workers cottage leased for him by his former pupil, Thomas Ellwood.

The cottage where he lived still stands today - his only surviving residence - and has been open as a museum since 1887. Since then it has remained open through two world wars, making the Covid-19 crisis the first time that Milton's Cottage hasn't re-opened to the public with the return of spring.

In common with museums across the country, we hope to open our doors again soon. In the meantime, we'll be expanding our online content during this period of quarantine to expand your literary horizons while you can't go out. So keep an eye on our website or follow us @MiltonsCottage on Twitter, Instagram & Facebook.

www.miltonscottage.org

MILTON & THE GREAT PLAGUE

Plague shadows the edges of Milton's poetry, from the "'slaughtering pestilence" of his youthful poem, On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of the Cough, *to the "red right hand that plagues us" in* Paradise Lost.

It's perhaps not surprising. Plague was a constant threat in 17th century London, where Milton grew up. Between the Black Death of 1348 and the Great Plague of 1665, the city experienced nearly 40 other outbreaks of plague of varying levels of severity.

Milton experienced it first-hand as a student at Christ's College Cambridge, when a major outbreak in 1625 killed nearly 30,000 people. It prevented him returning home to London when term ended in July, and forced him to flee to a country retreat when plague arrived in Cambridge at the beginning of August.

Like Covid-19, plague caused a shutdown of almost all shops, theatres, trade and social life. Lockdown then, however, was a virtual death sentence: victims were often nailed into their houses to stop the spread of the disease. Very few survived the experience.

The Great Plague devastated London in the summer of 1665. Almost 69,000 deaths were registered, although the true figure was probably nearer 100,000 - almost a quarter of the city's population.

PARADISE LOST UNDER LOCKDOWN

A Pandemic Reading List.

"The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n"
Paradise Lost, Book I, lines 254-55

There may be no better time to read Paradise Lost.

With the world in lockdown, there's time to savour every word of Milton's 10,565 *line epic - written as London was devastated by one of its worst ever outbreaks of bubonic plague in* 1665.

Milton may also have begun Paradise Lost *in lockdown conditions of his own. Following the Restoration of the Monarchy, in* 1660, *Milton was imprisoned in the Tower of London for his role in the Republican government - and it's thought he started work on the poem there.*

Two notable examples of people reading Paradise Lost *in prison are Milovan Djilas and Malcolm X. Djil*as - *Tito's former right-hand man - was imprisoned after falling out of favour and used his time under lock and key to translate Milton's epic onto prison toilet paper.*

You can read Paradise Lost *under lockdown at Dartmouth College's excellent online Milton Reading Room:* www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room

An even better way to experience the poem is to listen to it - reflecting the fact that Milton, who lost his sight at the age of 44, *dictated the poem to a series of amenuensi.*

Listen to Anton Lesser's remarkable reading as part of Audible's 30*-day free trial:* www.audible.co.uk/pd/Paradise-Lost-Audiobook/B004FTX10S

"Should intermitted vengeance arm again
His red right hand to plague us?"
Book II, lines 173-174

Milton is not the only writer to have taken inspiration from the plague. Pestilence and pandemics have long been themes for poets, playwrights and novelists, from Boccaccio's Decameron *to James Herbert's* Rats.

One writer who took direct inspiration from Milton's poetry is Mary Shelley, who not only pioneered the sci-fi genre but also invented the apocalyptic novel. Published in 1826, The Last Man *is set in England in* 2100, *after a plague has left only one man alive.*

As with Frankenstein, *Shelley took the novel's epigraph from* Paradise Lost*: "Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall / Him or his children."*

Here's some more pandemic fiction from fans of Milton for you to enjoy during self-isolation:

1. Masque of the Red Death - *Edgar Allan Poe*
2. La Peste - *Albert Camus*
3. The Day of the Triffids - *John Wyndham*
4. The Stand - *Stephen King*
5. Love in the Time of Cholera - *Gabriel Garcia Marquez*
6. Angels in America - *Tony Kushner*
7. Children of Men - *P.D. James*
8. Blindness - *Jose Saramego*
9. Orxy and Crake - *Margaret Atwood*
10. Station 11 - *Emily St John Mandel*

Happy reading!