

Milton in Edinburgh

A Response to the Play

by Alita Byrd

I read to him most afternoons, and took all meals with them, and slept there, too, sometimes. Then Milton, who would oft awaken in the night, sometimes found the muse had come to him in sleep, and would awaken me to write it down, coming to my room to squat like a blind toad by my bed, whispering in my ear his reams of verse.

Thorvald Aagaard, barefoot in a white cotton shirt and worn black jeans, stands on a small spotlit stage, taking his audience back to the seventeenth-century England of John Milton. From the moment the house lights dim to reveal the actor lying sprawled on stage before beginning his confessional, Thorvald Aagaard is no longer Thorvald Aagaard, graduate of Pacific Union College, drama teacher at Newbold College, and serious thespian, but Thomas Ellwood, Quaker pupil, friend, and secretary to “gout-wracked and blind” Milton, one of the greatest poets of all time.

As Thomas Ellwood awakes on stage he is shocked to see an audience watching his every move. “Who are you? What is this place? Why are you looking at me?” he demands, with such realism it is difficult not to answer.

The audience for this thought-provoking historical drama is none other than the demanding theatergoers of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, largest arts festival in the world, who descend on the capital of Scotland every August—this year buying almost one million tickets to see 683 companies perform a feast of 1,555 productions by actors from all over the world.

Competition among acting companies for a venue during the August festival season is intense, and further competition for an audience to watch one production from the hundreds of others on offer is brutal. Aagaard’s play about Milton was accepted by two Fringe venues; he chose Greyfriars Kirk House on Candlemaker Row, with Greyfriar’s Church on the hill just behind. Although crowds have not packed his show every afternoon, his audience is discerning and appreciative and the reviews have been excellent. As Aagaard says: “Milton is a tough sell, but I always knew that. It’s fine: the people who do come walk out with a look on their face like this show is one of the things they’ll really remember—most even stay and want to talk afterwards.”

Aagaard wrote his solo production *Middle Flight* himself, and with the simplicity of Shakespeare uses no costumes and limited props. The play brings remarkable insight to Milton’s life and is a wonderful vehicle for sharing many of his most memorable words, interspersed with Aagaard’s own lines, some of which are as haunting and poignant as Milton’s.

The historically accurate language of the play recalls Milton’s own style, and as Aagaard skillfully brings Ellwood to life, he is also able to transition between other characters, mimicking the voices and accents of a Cockney petty thief, a highway ruffian, Milton’s daughters, and other personalities in his tale. As one reviewer said: “With the spell-binding skill of a medieval bard he enacts the tale, slipping with admirable dexterity from the rigid posture of an old man to the flirtatious gestures of Milton’s young wife.”

Ellwood not only shares with his unexpected audience Milton's painful recollections of his tragic first marriage, but also confesses to a guilty dalliance with the poet's subsequent spouse, young and beautiful Elizabeth, indeed "much more fair than any blind man needs."

As Ellwood spends days, and sometimes nights, writing down verses the old man dictates that will eventually become *Paradise Lost*, he can't help thinking about Milton's explanation of the fall of the first parents in the Garden of Eden. As he sits in Milton's study, clutching Elizabeth's hand without the blind master's knowledge, he asks: "Thou hast said much of *Paradise Lost*. What hast thou to say of paradise gained?"

Aagaard walks about the small stage in front of a rapt audience, speaking as Ellwood would speak to Milton; then he sits as an old man would sit and speaks as Milton the old man would speak to Ellwood. His voice is low and articulate. Aagaard as Milton recites lines from *Paradise Lost*—Adam's words to Eve in the Garden:

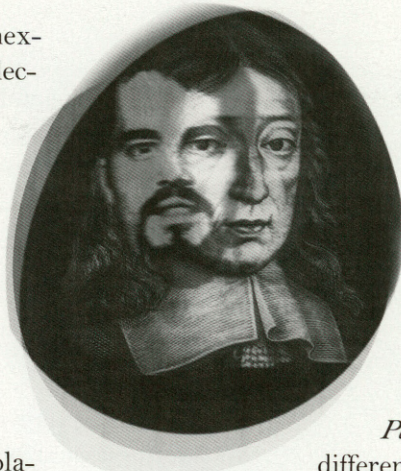
How can I live without thee? How forgo
Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined,
To live again in these wild woods forlorn?
Should God create another Eve, and I
Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart.

Then Milton explains to his young secretary Ellwood about his melancholy first wife and the pain they both endured as she fought against her deep depression. In Aagaard's words, he compares Adam's feelings for Eve with his own feelings for his dead first wife.

Divorce her! Nay! For don't you see I lov'd?
I could not put off that which was myself
However frail I found that flesh to be.

This heavy curse was laid on Adam too,
That Eve, his helpmeet else, must always be
The torment of his love, e'en to the grave.

How historically accurate are the details of Aagaard's play? Did Milton really have a secretary named Thomas Ellwood who had an affair with his wife? "The play is within spitting distance of the



truth," Aagaard explains.

Thomas Ellwood did exist and left an autobiography behind, and although the original manuscript of *Paradise Lost* is written in almost forty different hands, it is almost certain that one of the handwritings belongs to Ellwood.

Milton's first marriage was painful, with a separation of one and a half decades between husband and young wife, who later died in childbirth. Given the known facts, it is quite likely that Milton's first wife suffered from depression, Aagaard believes. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, contemporary to Milton's works, describes all of the common mental illnesses we are familiar with today. Aagaard has no factual basis for the feelings between later wife Elizabeth and Ellwood, but he believes it could have happened given the context.

Aagaard says his inspiration for the play came from his intrigue with the relationship between the creator and the hand. Milton created the verses, but without another hand, such as Ellwood's, who could write them down, we would not read his works today. Perhaps Milton thought of himself as a hand in another context; whereas God created the Garden and its people, Milton created the verse to bring their story alive in his world of Puritans, Oliver Cromwell, and the Restoration. The relationship between creator and hand is vital to the story told by Ellwood. As he tells his audience:

My sins and suffering have not been great, my
talent likewise small. I do not claim, like the
blessed seer, to have

'Measured this transient world, the race of
Time
Till time stand fixed: beyond is all abyss,
Eternity, whose end no eye can reach,'





But I wrote those words.
My hand helped light his star.
Even if it not outweigh my sin, at least it is some
part of immortality.
I wrote his words.
When you read them, will you think of me?

Aagaard took a class on John Milton taught by Karl Wilcox while studying at Newbold College in 1996-97, and wrote the first script of the play for his honors project at Pacific Union College in 1999, scribbling in longhand on bits of paper and scrabbling to finish before he was scheduled to read the script to his class. After spending time traipsing around the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last summer, watching play after play, he became convinced that he could produce his play for the Fringe. He tightened up the script and rehearsed the monologue so that it became second nature to him, noted in amazement by his reviewers, who have called his "the type of memory Einstein would weep over."

Aagaard's story—and his "Einstein" memory keep his Edinburgh audience spellbound, as he walks barefoot around the stage, sharing more about Milton's beautiful Elizabeth.

I found Elizabeth by chance, before I'd reached the house. She was standing by the hedge, her hair pulled back and fingers bloody, with one arm gathered full of roses the colour of a half-remembered dream. . . .

There are moments when all the best intentions are betrayed, when two hearts' wish against themselves may be revealed.

The tale unfolds under Aagaard's master-storyteller voice, just as it has every day for the last sixteen days of the Festival. But this particular performance is different than the sixteen before—as Aagaard recites the lines of Adam in *Paradise Lost*

Speechless he stood and pale, till thus at length
First to himself he inward silence broke

his face loses its color and he is sweating under the footlights and he says, "I apologize, I've been ill" and collapses onto a chair—the only prop onstage. The silent audience believes it is just part of the show until Aagaard's mother, visiting from California, rushes onto the stage. Aagaard is indeed ill—he would never stop a performance in the middle unless he were about to faint.

Three months earlier he was very ill, and hospitalized in Berkshire, near Newbold College, for almost a month. He thought he had recovered and took his production to Edinburgh as planned. He almost made it. Only the last three shows had to be canceled after an ambulance arrived at the theater to carry him to the nearby emergency room. The disappointed audience was left, each to "with slow and solitary step; find his own way home."

Fortunately, the relapse wasn't serious and Aagaard was out of the hospital in a few days, returning to Newbold College to perform there as scheduled.

Perhaps it is the strength of Milton, blind and yet driven to record his poems against all odds, that inspires him. Aagaard's next play, of which he has already written several scenes, is about the humor and pathos of hospital wards. Aagaard is determined never to reach anything more than a very temporary end to his acting dreams, as Ellwood in the play, must:



Now I indeed have reached an end, and thus I stand,
my middle flight returned to earth: judge me as you will.

Alita Byrd writes from London, where she is completing a master's degree in the history of international relations at the London School of Economics.
a.k.byrd@se.ac.uk