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Author(s)	Kanasaki, Yae
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Changing World in *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*: Milton's Reworking of Renaissance Tradition

Yae KANASAKI

1. Introduction

On the Morning of Christ's Nativity (1629)¹⁾ written by John Milton (1608-1674) is a religious poem known as Milton's first step to becoming a poet.²⁾ This poem, generally called Nativity Ode, is the most famous work among the poems which young Milton wrote in Cambridge University. Milton himself seems to think this poem is well accomplished because he puts this poem at the beginning of his first book, *Poems of Mr. John Milton* (1645). However many critics haven't paid much attention to this poem when we compare it with Milton's other earlier pastoral poems such as *Lycidas* (1637) or *Comus* (1634) despite the fact that even nowadays the critics appreciate this poem at the point of the completion rate as one nativity ode. The main reason is that Milton's originality can be scarcely found in this poem.

The discussions toward this poem are generally divided into two. The first evaluation is that, as *Douke* and others suggest, this poem is "a well organized religious poem" based on the form of Nativity of the day, which was written under the influence of contemporary poets (*Douke* 147-8).

Second is the discussion from the perspective of Milton's poetic

carrier as Goekjian suggests: “It is usually considered Milton’s first great poem, because it shares with his later masterpieces many of the features that make them great: it treats a Christian subject through both classical and Christian images;” (Goekjian 119). Some critics find in this poem some common features which also exist in Milton’s later masterpieces and appreciate this poem highly because of it.³⁾ Especially, this poem often receives high appreciation when it is discussed with *Paradise Lost* (1661-67) dealing with the same Biblical episode as in this poem.

However a new movement appears in the last twenty years. Some critics began to find Milton’s uniqueness and significance which exist in the poem itself and reevaluate them. Though most critics have discussed *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* from religious viewpoint comparing it with Bible and discussing similarity or difference, some critics begin to interpret this poem from another perspective. Certainly this poem cannot be separated completely from religious element because of the poem’s theme, but Martin Evans, Donald Swanson or other critics try to find another new evaluation in this poem, such as Milton’s political thought or religious conversion. In this paper, I also would like to reconsider Milton’s originality in this poem and find a new evaluation arguing Nature and discussing previous discussions.

2. Is *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* a Traditional Nativity Poem?

It has been said that this poem doesn’t deviate from the convention of traditional nativity ode. Let us consider the “convention” or “tradition” of “general” nativity poem.

From 16th century to the present day, nativity poem has been loved

by various poets. Especially in 17th century, many nativity poems were written by religious poets such as John Donne (1572-1631) or George Herbert (1592-1633). The definition of nativity ode is hard to define. The only common feature is the theme of the poem, "the Nativity".

(1) Similarity in Traditional Nativity Ode: Retelling of Bible

This "Nativity of Christ" is the episode written in Mathew and Luke of New Testament. So we can say that nativity ode is the poem in which the poets "retell" this scene, add the words of the celebration and sometimes state poets' individual religious suffering or his faith. Therefore some of the characters, Maria, Josef, Jesus, Three Wise Men or King Herod, are frequently written in nativity poem.

Now I'd like to compare Milton's poem with other poets' nativity poems in 17th century. The religious poet Donne describes the birth of Christ in *Nativitie* (1610), one poem of his Divine Poems, Holy Sonnets.

Immensitie cloystered in thy dear wombe,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There he hath made himselfe to his intent
Weake enough, now into the world to come;

(John Donne, *Nativitie* 1-4)

Then, let us see the description of Nativity in Milton's Ode. *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* consists of two parts: the first four stanzas as prologue⁴⁾ and "The Hymn", the latter 27 stanzas. In the first four stanzas, Milton expresses the birth of the baby.

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
 Wherein the Son of Heaven's eternal King,
 Of wedded maid and Virgin Mother born,
 Our great redemption from above did bring; (1-4)

Milton describes similar scene as Donne does. Also Donne and Milton use the similar expressions about the coming of Three Wise men; Donne's expression is "and from th' Orient, / Starres, and wisemen will travel" (*Nativity* 6-7), Milton's is "The star-led Wizards haste with odours sweet!" (23). Here both Milton and Donne retell the biblical episode and we can't deny the argument that the both poems are under the tradition of nativity ode.

(2) Disappearance of Christ's appearance and Nativity description

However, Milton differs from Donne in the some point, especially about the descriptions of Christ. Donne uses the words which suggest Jesus many times including "he", "his" or "himself", only in the fourteen lines of his poem. Christ always exists in the center of Donne's *Nativity*. When Donne refers to Jesus' Mother Maria, he does not write the name Maria but implies her existence as the "body" which bears the child: "His well below'd imprisonment" (*Nativity* 2).

On the contrary, the center of Milton's poem is not Christ. Certainly Milton writes about the scene of Nativity in the prologue. However he uses the word suggesting Christ only one time in the first four stanzas, "Son of Heaven's eternal King" (2). Instead, Milton describes the world

surrounding Christ. The “world” is center of Milton’s Nativity Ode.

Also the unique point of this poem is the appearance of Christ. Milton doesn’t represent the appearance of Christ nor use words of praise or celebration toward the baby. Now let’s compare Milton’s poem with other 17th century poems. Herbert praises the glorious baby; “O Thou, whose glorious, yet contracted light,” (*Christmas* 12). In *An ode of the Birth of our Saviors* (1631?)⁵⁾ written by Robert Herrick (1591-1674), the word “glory” is also used to glorify Nativity and the baby; “But we will entertaine Thee / With Glories to await here /Upon Thy Princely State here,” (*An ode of the Birth of our Saviors* 25-27). In general nativity poem, the appearance of the baby and the celebration of his birth are frequently described.

However Milton doesn’t refer to the appearance of the baby or the glory which the baby has. He never praises the baby. The description of the baby is only ten or less lines in 244 lines. In this Nativity Ode, Milton doesn’t pay so much attention to the baby. Instead, he praises the world changed by the birth of the baby.

(3) Absence of Poet and Characters

On the Morning of Christ's Nativity has another characteristic point. It is that the poet “I” doesn’t appear in this poem. If we compare this poem with Donne’s *Nativity*, the difference between two is remarkable. In the former part of the poem, Donne writes the scene of Nativity using third person narrator, as I quoted in the section 2. Then suddenly he begins to talk to his soul and confess his agony of faith using first person narrator: “Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he / Which

fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lye?”(*Nativity* 9-10) Also Herbert begins to speak to his soul after he celebrates Christmas; “my soul Since my dark soul and brutish is Thy right, / To man of all beasts be not Thou a stranger:” (*Christmas* 11-2).

On the contrary, the voice or the thought of the author doesn’t appear in Milton’s poem. Though critics often criticize that Milton asserts his persona too strongly or writes too much comment in his works whether using first person narrator or third person narrator, Milton extinguishes “himself” in this poem. The words such as “I”, “my” or “me” are never used and also the emotion or thought of Milton is never described. Evans argues the narrative stance of this poem which uses third person narrator from beginning to end. He points out that Milton’s Nativity ode is completely anonymous and it is exceptional to the tradition of 16th or 17th century’s nativity poem. (Evans 13). As Evans suggests, it is unusual that there is no existence of author despite the fact that the poem bases on Christianity which consists of the conversation between a person and God.

(4) The Significance of “The Hymn”

In addition to Milton’s deviations from the traditional nativity poem which I suggested in section 2 and 3, this poem has another feature. It is the existence of “The Hymn”, the latter twenty four stanzas of the poem. If Milton follows the convention of nativity ode, he needs not add The Hymn to the prologue. The first four stanzas of prologue in which the scene of Christ’s birth is described is one completed nativity ode itself. However Milton adds The Hymn spending about two hundreds lines. We

should consider why Milton writes The Hymn.

Evans explains this fact using the word “purge”. At first he points out “the absence” of characters and the author’s voice and then indicates its two reasons. The first one is that “Milton forces the reader to respond to the scene not vicariously, through the experience of the wise men and the shepherds, but directly” (Evans 16). The second reason is that, he says, the theme which Milton wants to express in this poem is not Christ’s Nativity but the changing world which excludes the old and welcomes the new. In this point, he finds Milton’s religious conversion from Anglican Church to puritan and relates it to England colonial policy in 17th Century which drives the rebels and tries to purge the nation. Evans concludes that Milton’s Nativity Poem is a poem of “purge”.

Evans interprets the religious and political significances of The Hymn and appreciates them. However The Hymn has other aspects apart from political or religious elements and should be discussed from another viewpoint.

I agree with Evans’ second suggestion that the theme of this poem is not Nativity itself but the “changing world” which the birth of the baby causes. It is not the baby himself but the “world” surrounding the baby that Milton uses to express the majesty of Christ. Then what is the world which Milton tries to create in this poem?

3. The World of the poem: Influence and Departure from Virgil’s *Eclogue*

Milton eliminates the element which is thought to be needed for traditional nativity ode, such as characters including Jesus, the praise for baby and the author’s faith. Instead of these, he describes the changing

world: from the dark sight of the winter night before Nativity to the bright landscape of the morning after Nativity.

The change of the world isn't referred to at all in the New Testament which is the base of Milton's Nativity Ode. Donne and Herbert, whom I quoted before, don't notice the world surrounding Christ in their poems. The only thing they consider is Christ himself or their own faith. Milton's contemporary Herrick and later poet Henry Vaughn (1622-05) describe the glorious morning of Nativity in their poems in which the bird sings and the sunlight shines, but they never writes about the changing world. They only celebrate and cheer the birth of Jesus. It is only Milton who pays attention not to Jesus himself but to the changing world.

However, it is said that Milton doesn't come up with the idea of the world's change by himself. Donald Swanson and other critics point out that this Nativity Ode is influenced by the fourth song of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Though Virgil's pastoral has no relationship with Christianity at its heart, it has been related with Christ in the Renaissance age, as Fujii points out:

In the middle ages, the fourth song [of Virgil's *Eclogue*], in which the poet predicts the returning of Golden age brought by the birth of one baby, comes out of pastoral frame and begins to be interpreted as the prediction of Christ's Nativity. This is why Virgil is praised in Christian nations. (Fujii 202)

Swanson discusses that Milton merges Virgil's fourth song with

Revelation, rewrites it in a Christian way and creates the poem *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*.

The motifs of the eclogue commonly presumed to have served as a model for Milton's poem are the plea for inspiration from the Muses and the anticipation of a divine man who will be born of a virgin during the *pa Augustae* and will usher in the return of the Stoic Golden Age. But Milton also develops a series of Parallel motifs between the Fourth Eclogue and the Book of Revelation, which are in turn integrated with the text of the *Nativity Ode* and fused with the informed reader's developing sense of Christ's mission.

(Swanson 59)

It is certain that Milton is influenced by Virgil and I can't deny completely such discussion that Milton's Nativity Poem is Christian rewriting of Virgil's. Traditional nativity poem is the song which tells the "affair" of Christ's Nativity, but Milton doesn't take such way. Though *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* is written in the genre of a religious poem, it resembles a pastoral in the point that Milton describes the landscape which is ignored in ordinary religious poetry.

However, Milton doesn't translate or only imitate Virgil's *Eclogue*. Milton's poem differs from Virgil's poem in some points.

One of the differences between two is the pace of world's change. In the fourth song of Virgil, the change of the world begins immediately when the promised child is born. When the child grows up, the Golden Age and Arcadia in which people receive the blessing without the

labour come to the world and the change will finish at that time. On the contrary, in *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, the perfect ordered world doesn't arrive soon. The transformation of the world begins with the birth of Christ as same as in Virgil's poem. However Milton implies that the Nativity is "only" the first step of the change: "And then at last our bliss / Full and perfect is, / But now begins;" (165-167 my underline). The perfect world doesn't come soon. Milton implies that people will obtain the salvation only "at the world's last session" (163).

Another different point is that Virgil doesn't describe the landscape "before" the birth of the celebrated baby. He only states the fruitful Nature and the ordered world "after" the baby is born. Milton describes the world before Nativity and after Nativity. Therefore, though both Virgil and Milton describe the world's change, we can say that Virgil notes the already changed "world" and Milton emphasizes the "change" of the world.

4. Change of Nature

Thus we can understand that "change" is the most important idea of Milton's Nativity Ode. Though Milton doesn't describe the change in the prologue, he suggests three changes in The Hymn; the rout of the pagan gods, music suddenly floating out from the heaven and change of nature.

The scene of the rout of pagan gods seems to be a climax of this poem. Evans argues that "the real climax of the *Nativity Ode* is not the appearance of the age of gold, as it is in the *Eclogue*, but the departure of the pagan deities." (Evans 34). He points out that Milton uses the strategies of inclusion and exclusion; excluding the pagan gods and

including the needed element of Grecian culture such as the invocation toward Muse or beautiful pastoral landscape. Evans relates this to the religious policy of 17th century's Anglican Church which denies polytheism conflicting with Christian monotheism and imports the needed foreign customs. Though Evans interprets this change religiously, I argue that Milton writes this scene to emphasize the coming of the new world and impress the reader with the transformation of the world. Milton uses ten stanzas to describe this scene. After Grecian gods defeat and run away from their land, the landscape changes completely. The oracles and Grecian shrines are abandoned and no one exists there. Milton tries to emphasize the gap between the old age and the new age.

The second important element of The Hymn is the music from heaven, which has been lost for a long time after the corruption of human. In ordinary nativity poem, visual elements such as the Christ's glorious figure are often used. Audible elements like music here are not so much used except in bird song. The music seems to be young Milton's new trial. (Such audible expressions are often used by the old Milton who becomes blind.)

However the most characteristic and highly appreciated point in this Nativity Ode is not such audible elements but visual descriptions. Milton describes the beautiful pastoral sight that we can't so much find in Milton's later poems which T. S. Eliot criticizes crucially because of the lack of visual description and too much rhetorical artifice. Here Milton uses various visual expressions, such as the sea, the sky, the star, the lawn and so on, to express the changing world.

Among such visual descriptions, we should consider Nature. As

I discussed in part 2, the human characters and the poet's thoughts don't appear in most of this poem. Only the sleeping baby in the manger is described in the prologue and the last stanza of the Hymn. Instead of such human characters, personalized Peace, Nature or other personalized inorganic substance appear in this poem. The descriptions of personalized Nature are especially unique. Generally, personalized Nature in the Renaissance Period is described as the embodiment of God and the beauty wearing the colorful clothes. However Milton expresses Nature differently.

Nature, in awe to him,
 Had doffed her gaudy trim,
 With her great Master so to sympathize:
 It was no season then for her
 To wanton with the Sun, her lusty Paramour.
 Only with speeches fair
 He woos the gentle air
 To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
 And on her naked shame,
 Pollute with sinful blame,
 The saintly veil of maiden white to throw;
 Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
 Should look so near upon her foul deformities. (32-44)

Milton's personalized Nature doesn't wear the colorful clothing because the season is winter, December 25th, the birthday of Christ. In addition

to her appearance, the personality is different from the general image of calm and unmoved Nature. Nature here fears and worries about her ugliness. Nature in the Renaissance Period is “Natura Naturata”, which means Nature created by God, and thought to be an ordered and complete existence. Nature in these days is completely harmonious and never changes. However in this poem, Nature is a sinful existence. Milton seems to try to break the traditional Nature to change it.

The other characteristic point of this poem is the “colorful world”. Most nativity poems do not have the world with color except the whole-colored world only covered with the light or the glory of Christ, as I quoted in Part 2. However Milton doesn’t describe the appearance of the baby, so his world is full of color.

Firstly, Milton uses the color “white” to describe Nature. Nature covers her face with “snow” (39) and wants “veil of maiden white” (42). Then the green of Peace’s corona appears in the world.

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
She, crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere (45-48; my underline)

In the fifth stanza, the world changes by Nativity of Christ and the various colors appear in the world. The passage below is the second last stanza of the poem.

So, when the Sun in bed,

Curtained with cloudy red,
 Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
 The flocking shadows pale
 Troop to the infernal jail,
 Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,
 And the yellow-skirted Fays
 Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved maze.

(229-236; my underline)

In these colors, we should note “white” of Nature. As I said before, Nature of 17th century is thought to wear colorful clothes. However Nature in Milton’s poem is white. It is unusual. Moreover he emphasizes the white color in his ode. He uses the word which suggests white color twice; “snow” (39) and “white” (42). Except this part, he uses one word suggesting the color per one color. So we can understand that he tries to impress the reader with a white world covered with snow.

Why does he give the color white to Nature and emphasize it? I think the reason is that Milton wants the reader to see the changing world. White is the color which can be dyed to all colors. The first character that appears in this poem is personalized Nature wearing white. The white world covered by snow is dyed with the green of Peace in the third stanza. Then the green world is dyed with the blue of sea in the fifth stanza, indigo blue of the sky in the tenth stanza and finally the red of the sun. As the dawn breaks, the world is gradually dyed with the brighter color. As the color of the world changes, peace spreads around the world.

Moreover Milton describes the transition of time to express the changing world. Many poets only describes the morning of Nativity and not the evening or the night. Donne, Herbert and Vaughn don't pay much attention to the time in their nativity poem. In Milton's Nativity Ode, the time passes slowly. It is before dawn at the beginning of The Hymn. At the end of The Hymn, the sun rises and the morning comes. So the reader can imagine the gradual change of the sky's color.

5. Conclusion

On the Morning of Christ's Nativity includes two aspects: a traditional religious poem and an unconventional poem, not religious nor pastoral. The prologue, the first four stanzas, is written under the convention of traditional nativity poem. On the other hand, The Hymn deviates from the tradition. Milton tries to eliminate the author's voice and usual character such as Maria or Josef. Instead, he writes the personalized Nature and Peace and describes the changing world.

Then what does Milton want to do in this poem? It seems to me that the true theme of this poem is the "changing world" and The Hymn plays an important role in this poem. In The Hymn, he tries to express the various changes including Nature's change and we can find Milton's various new challenges and his originality there. Though this Nativity Ode has been regarded as a featureless poem and not appreciated for a long time, this poem is an experimental poem in which Milton tries to develop new poetry and it should be appreciated highly.

Notes

- 1) John Milton, *Milton Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd ed, (London: Longman, 1997). Subsequent references to the poem will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2) Milton enclosed this poem in the letter to his childhood friend, Charles Diodadi (1609-1638), with a message that Milton “began the poem before dawn on Christmas Day”. (See Carey 101)
- 3) Hirai also argues that “this Nativity Ode attracts critics’ attention not because of this poem’s aesthetic worth but because of one sign of the poetical development as the poet Milton or his poetical pattern.” (Hirai 59)
- 4) Though Milton doesn’t write the title of first four stanzas, critics call this part “the prologue” of Nativity Ode.
- 5) This poem was written in the same year or some years later, so Milton wasn’t influenced by it. But I refer to this poem as one example of nativity poem of the 17th century.

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(Graduate Student)

SUMMARY

Changing World in *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*:
Milton's Reworking of Renaissance Tradition

Yae KANASAKI

Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (1629) is not given much attention when we compare it with Milton's other earlier pastorals. Many critics point out that Milton's originality can be scarcely found in this poem.

Certainly the prologue of this poem is strongly influenced by the convention of nativity poem. However The Hymn deviates from tradition in many aspects. There are no descriptions about the Christ's appearance, words of celebration, nor Milton's confession. The center of the poem is neither Christ nor Nativity but the world surrounding the baby. The Hymn suggests that the theme which Milton wants to write in this poem is not Nativity of Christ but "the changing world" caused by it.

The most important aspect of The Hymn is the "Change of Nature" and the "Change of Colors". After the birth of the baby, Nature and the landscape start changing. As the world changes, the color of the world also turns brighter. The personalized Nature wearing white clothes and her character is especially important because it differs from general Renaissance Nature, *Natura Naturata*.

As a result, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* includes two aspects: a traditional religious poem and an unconventional poem. In The Hymn, Milton tries to challenge the new way. Though this Nativity Ode has been regarded as a featureless poem, this poem is an experimental poem in which Milton tries to develop new poetry.

Keywords : John Milton, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, change, Nature