

A Comparison of Milton's Treatment of Death in "Death of a Fair Infant" and "Marchioness of Winchester"

Barbara Sims

It is a tribute to Milton's genius to study his delicate line of demarcation between the treatment of death in "Marchioness of Winchester" and "Death of a Fair Infant." In the latter poem, Milton imbues his work with a tone of comfort and hope—a tone which we do not find in the former poem. Of course, we must keep in mind the fact that in "Death of a Fair Infant," Milton was emotionally connected with the deceased, and would naturally inject his lines with a note of personal grief and sympathy for the bereaved. Upon contemplating Milton's lines, the reader is aware that his treatment of death is in perfect harmony with the subject. There are beautiful allusions to light, somewhat ethereal figures, and nowhere do we find ponderous passages of dark, black mourning which would add a grimness totally out of keeping with the qualities of fancy in this poem. He tells the lamenting mother that her loss is a gift of God, and closes his poem on a rather enigmatic note of promise.

In complete contrast with the treatment of the death of a child, Milton's epitaph on the death of a regal lady expresses an unshakably flat finality about death. Here, Milton was almost completely detached from his subject and could write sincerely inspiring lines or poetry eulogizing his subject. But, where other poets might have written epitaphs of a coldly impersonal nature, Milton's lines radiate a warmth of feeling immediately discernible to the reader. It is peculiarly characteristic of Milton's style that, even in his youth, his almost innate skill with words enabled him to suggest, by using a few picturesque words, a whole series of images. In a few well-chosen words, we get a complete picture of the circumstances surrounding the death of the Marchioness. In "Death of a Fair Infant," Milton treats of death as a kindly sort of fairy, wafting the child's soul away to Never-Never Land, while death to the Marchioness is a grim, abrupt cessation of life. Thus, we find that Milton wrote beautifully harmonious treatments, as well as exquisite lines of poetry.