

**Second Close Reading Paper Assignment**  
**ENGL 2121: British Literature I**

**DUE: November 6, 2007**

Your *Canterbury Tales* close reading papers, in which you strove toward modern, yet intelligent and entertaining translations of Chaucer's text, were centered on illuminating the sometimes difficult and subtle shifts our language has made during its journey from Middle to Modern English and making the text accessible to a modern audience—an audience not necessarily interested in the nuances and webs of language you had to untangle.

We have moved forward in time and language to the Early Modern Period (or the Renaissance, if you prefer), and thus the task of “translating” is of slightly less concern. Most readers would not have trouble with the Englishes of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers; spelling is more uniform and words are more recognizable as modern thanks to the printing press and the continued prevalence of London's dialect (sprouting from the East Midlands dialect of Middle English, if you'll recall), syntax and word order are often clearer to modern readers due to the almost total eradication of inflections, and these words frequently exist in some form or fashion in our own Modern English.

It is that phrase “in some form or fashion” that concerns us in this assignment and as readers of Early Modern English. First, we must never forget that English is a living language, always evolving and changing, therefore, with each and every word we speak. Words might have taken new meanings in the three centuries since 1699, and uses popular during those times might have dropped out of vogue in recent years, and English was evolving even during those centuries; neologisms are everywhere in Shakespeare and Milton. Next, we must remember our situation in history and literature. Writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were highly aware of the possibilities and promises of English, especially in light of its long maligned reputation as a language unworthy of poetry and learning. These centuries were also a time of major political and social upheaval, necessitating careful subtlety and cunning on the part of the poet. We must also remember that not all our poets were on the same side of the upheaval fence; a common word or reference might have strikingly different meanings depending on the writer and his placement in society. Finally, we must realize that work of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries draws on texts which, for better or worse, are not as familiar to twenty-first century readers as they were to our prior counterparts. Allusions to the Bible and religious turmoil, references to Greek and Roman mythologies and cosmologies, nods to the Ptolemaic theory of the universe (which was undone during this time by Galileo and his telescope but still served its purpose as a striking poetic image) and other scientific concerns of the Renaissance, and so forth might be implied by a word or group of words and misunderstood or missed completely by modern readers not well schooled in these traditions.

So many things to remember and consider! Your task? Well, since there is so much to remember about this time period, it's a bit different from your first assignment. You are to shine light upon these subtleties and references and make these poems more clear for modern readers—including yourself—through close reading. Choose a short poem or a passage from a longer poem by an author from the sixteenth or seventeenth century and explicate it fully (notice that I used the term *explicate*, rather than the word *translate*; it implies a more careful and delicate approach) using the *Oxford English Dictionary*, The Bible, and other sources as necessary. Pay close attention to poetics when applicable and possible, including but not limited to rhyme scheme, prevailing sounds, form, and figurative language. It will probably be worth your while to *do research* on your chosen poem and see what has already been said, what remains to be said, and what you can say better than those who have worked previously with the text. While you are not absolutely required to do so, it will surely result in a better argument, a clear explication, and thus a better grade. My advice is to explicate a small portion of a poem—even if you choose a sonnet—and work within the larger sense of the text.

Attached to this assignment guide you will find a passage from a paper on Milton's “Sonnet XII.” I've attached a copy of the poem itself as well, purely for your convenience. I might as well be up front about this whole thing and tell you that the paper is mine, written in a split-level Milton course. There are some major problems, trust me. However, I'm copying and pasting a decent section of the paper for you, both so that you can see something in the neighborhood of what I'm looking for and so that you can see how best to cite the *OED* in text. I don't expect you to write the same way that I do or any of that, but I thought you might appreciate an actual example. And just think! Once you're done with this assignment, you might have some good fodder for a graduate school writing sample!

As far as requirements, I'd like copies of any scholarly sources you use, a copy of the poem you choose (if it's not in the *NAEL*), and excellent *OED* citations (no copies necessary). There is no page requirement. Simply answer your own questions fully and do the poetry justice. Happy writing!

## Sonnet XII

I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs  
By the known rules of ancient liberty,  
When straight a barbarous noise environs me  
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs:  
As when those hinds that were transform'd to frogs  
Rail'd at Latona's twin-born progeny  
Which after held the sun and moon in fee.  
But this is got by casting pearl to hogs,  
That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,  
And still revolt when truth would set them free.  
Licence they mean when they cry liberty;  
For who loves that, must first be wise and good.  
But from that mark how far they rove we see,  
For all this waste of wealth and loss of blood.

My thesis statement? For now, it's that the two usual readings of the poem are *both* present in the work, and not mutually exclusive. The sonnet is dichotomous, blah blah blah. This is my some of my argument about the first quatrain—the third and fourth lines. Also, my angry editorial notes to myself are still present here. Sorry.

Milton describes the Presbyterian reaction to his divorce tracts, and his surprise at and disgust with that reaction, in line three of the sonnet, “When straight a barbarous noise environs me.” Literally, the outcry was harsh and came quickly. The divorce tracts were attacked as early as September 1644. ADD MORE HERE. Milton’s disgust shows through the layered meanings of *barbarous* and *noise*. *Barbarous*, aside from implying harshness, meant “unpolished, without literary culture; pertaining to illiterate people, ‘not Christian, or heathen,’ and ‘uncultured, uncivilized, unpolished; rude, rough, wild, savage’” (OED a. “barbarous” i. b.; ii.; iii.). *Noise* carries the connotation of “common talk” (OED sb. “noise” ii. a.), something that doesn’t have any particular significance or meaning. With these words Milton implies that the Presbyterians are common, or low. DUH! COME ON, JONES. *Noise* also points to the fact that Milton was well aware of, and most likely proud of, the effect he was having on England, though he dismisses his causing it in the sonnet’s first line (“I did but prompt”); the word also meant “to make an outcry, to talk much or loudly, *about* a thing” and “to be much talked of, to be the object of general notice and comment” (OED sb. “noise” vi. a.; b.). Milton often calls attention to his own importance and knowledge, and this usage of *noise* seems to be an example of that propensity.

Milton continues showing his disgust in the fourth line of the sonnet, calling those who make the previous noise “owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs.” Though modern usage of *owl* implies wisdom, in Milton’s time it meant “ignorance” (Leonard 692). The term was also applied to persons with allusion to “nocturnal habits, to literal or figurative repugnance to light, to appearance of gravity and wisdom” (OED sb. “owl” ii. a.). In this way, Milton accuses the Presbyterians, or, with regard to the Civil War context of the poem, the Royalists, of being against God, *light* often referring to Christ and Christians biblically, as in, “A Light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32), and “Ye are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Modern usage of *cuckoo* when applied to a person means simply “silly;” however, Milton’s usage is “fool,” which is considerably stronger (OED sb. “cuckoo” iii.). The pejorative *asses* not only calls the noisemakers ignorant, conceited, and perverse, but also calls into mind the image of slavery in the sonnet’s first line, asses being beasts of burden (OED sb. “ass” i. b.; e.). *Ape* has interesting double connotations here, and Milton’s dismay with those who would protest his tracts as well as those who would follow him too easily. In addition to naming the dissenters fools, which Milton has already done with *cuckoo*, calling the noisemakers *apes* throws to the “imitating” sense of the word (OED sb. “ape” i; iii; iv.). When applied to a person, *dog* means “a worthless, despicable, surly, or cowardly fellow,” a meaning evident enough in Milton’s third line; however, there is an allusive context here for a modern reader, and a possibly colloquial context for a contemporary reader of Sonnet XII. According to the *OED*, *dog* was first used in this context in Act I, Scene iii of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, written in 1600. When asked if she has words, Rosalind answers, “Not one to throw at a dog” (OED sb. “dog” I. iii. a.; II. xvi. a.). With this allusion/colloquialism, Milton implies that neither God’s law nor a freer English law is fitting for those who would protest his tracts. Milton also asserts his own words as too good for the Presbyterians and Royalists, and readers are yet again reminded of Milton’s pride in his work. Further emphasis is put on this assertion by *dog*’s placement at the end of the sonnet’s first quatrain and the comic rhyme, with *clog*, employing the *og* sound. This rhyme occurs again in the second quatrain, where Milton rhymes *frogs* and *hogs*, further emphasizing Milton’s opinions on law, his own work, and his audience.