The Three Variables of 17th-Century Poetry

¶ 5.1

$$f(1603+) = x + y + z$$

x = Religious and Political Upheaval
(How did poets respond?)

y = Metaphysical Conceits
(What are they and why do they still surprise us?)

z = Milton's Epic
(How did epic form become an argument about freedom and obedience?)

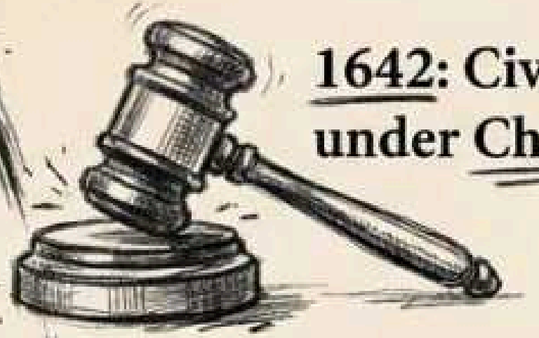
The Calculus of Civil War



1603: *James I takes the throne.*



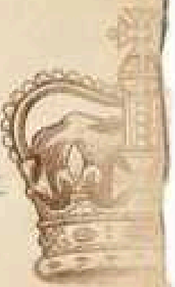
1611: *King James Bible (work of ~48 scholars).*



1642: Civil War begins under Charles I.

1653–1660: *Oliver Cromwell rules as Lord Protector. Monarchy returns in 1660.*





1603 1611 1642 1649 1653 1660

Jan 1649: Execution of Charles I.

The Cavaliers: $f(t)$ = Pleasure - Time



Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* (1648).

Ethos: *Gather rosebuds while ye may. Graceful, light, seizing the day.*

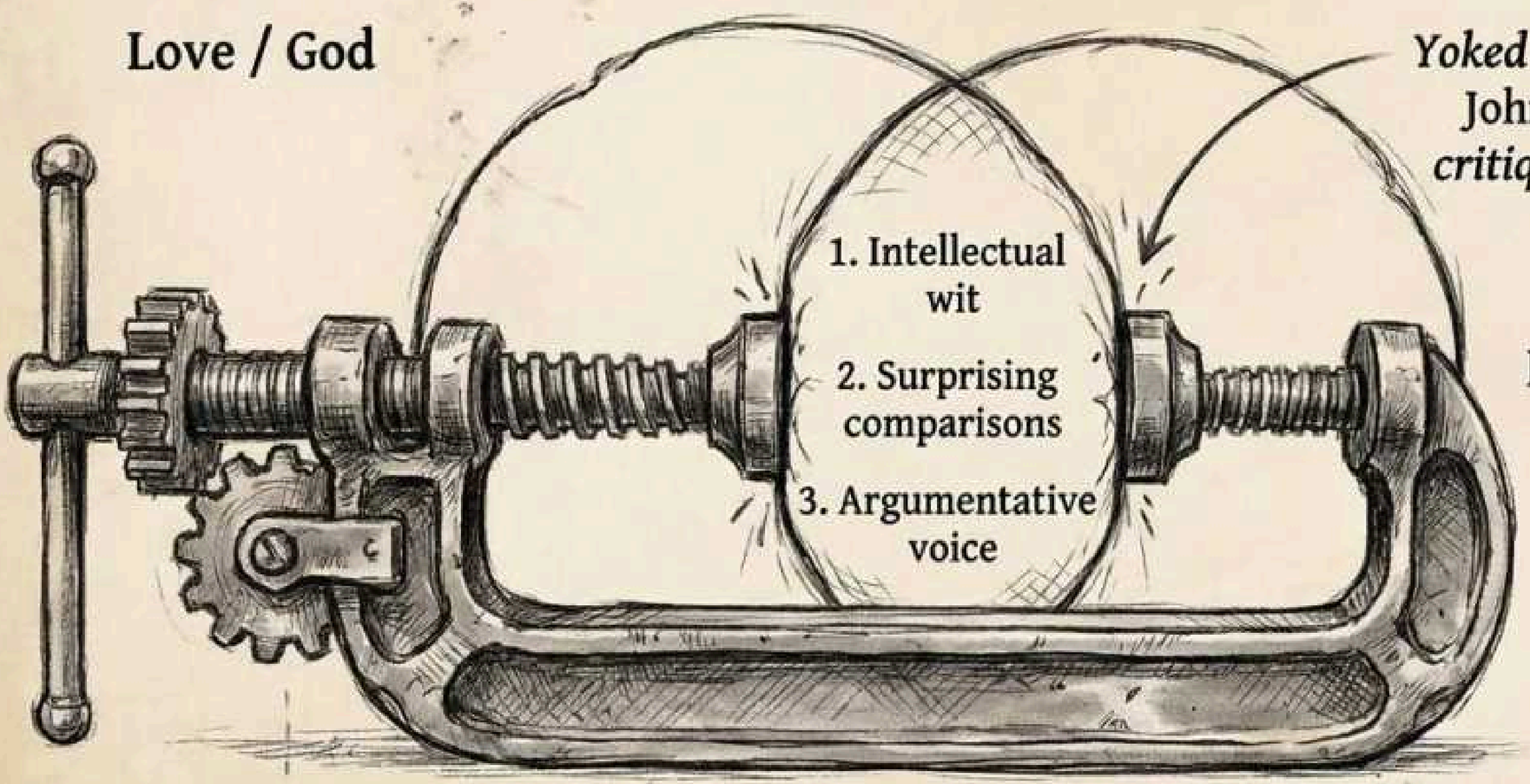
Richard Lovelace. Wrote *To Althea, from Prison* while jailed by Parliament.



Stone walls ≠ Prison

Royalist loyalty combined with a defiant love for the pleasures of life.

Defining the Metaphysical



Yoked by violence – Samuel Johnson's 18th-century *critique of their surprising comparisons.*

1693 *John Dryden officially uses the term 'metaphysical' for Donne.*

John Donne: A Branching Path

Catholic Roots (born 1572) –> Turns toward Church of England

1601: Secret Marriage to Anne More. Briefly imprisoned.

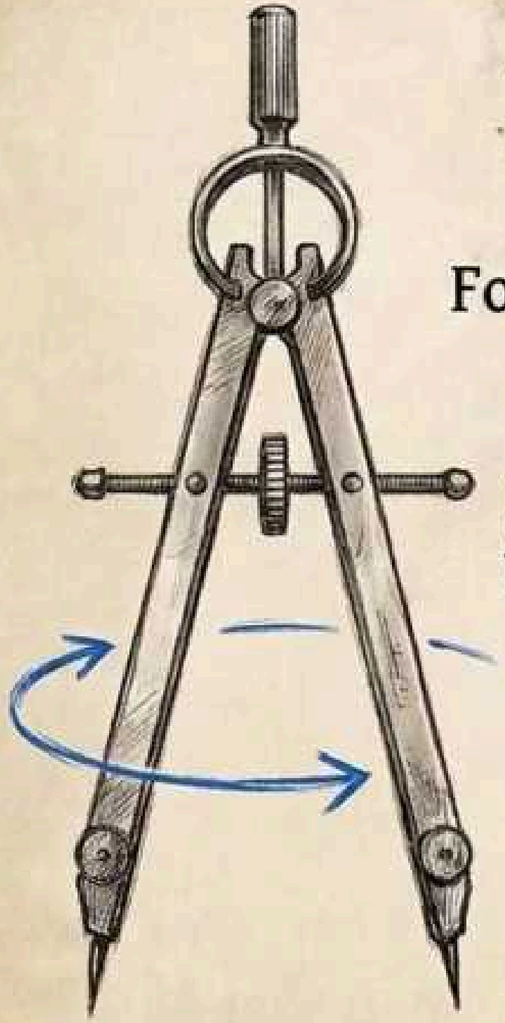
1615: Anglican Priest

1621: Dean of St. Paul's (Famous Preacher)

1633: Love poems published posthumously.

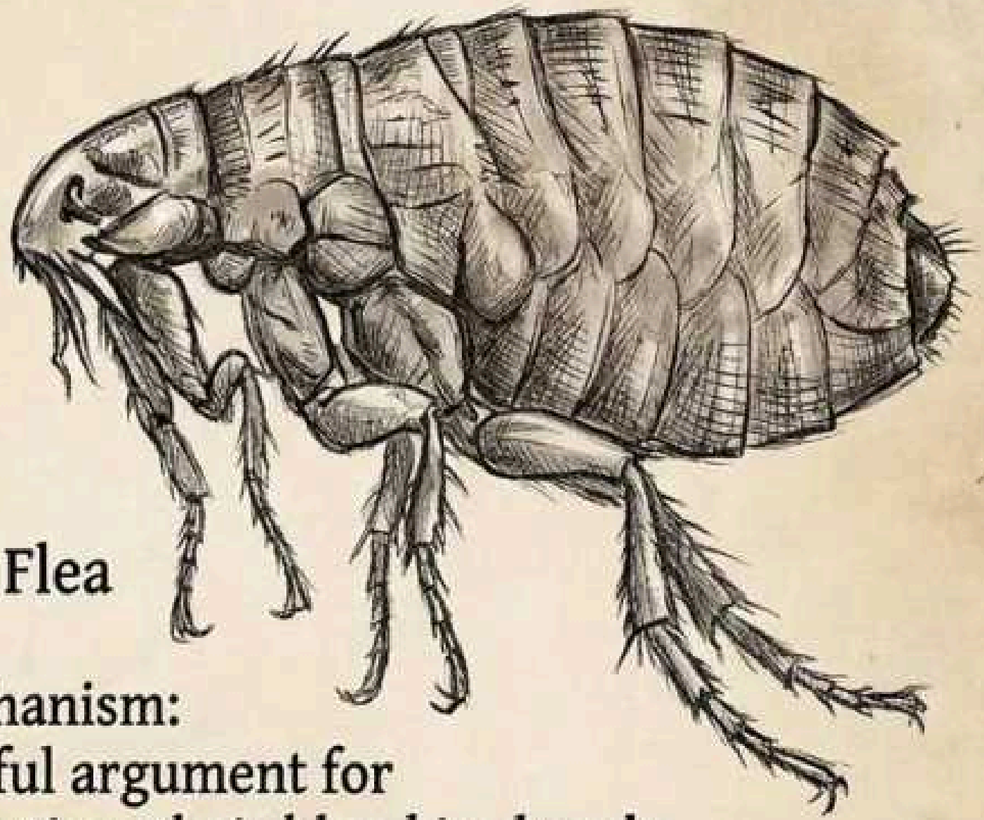
The Anatomy of a Conceit

¶ 5.6



A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

Mechanism:
Fixed center leg = the spiritual anchor.
Roaming leg = the separated traveling lover.

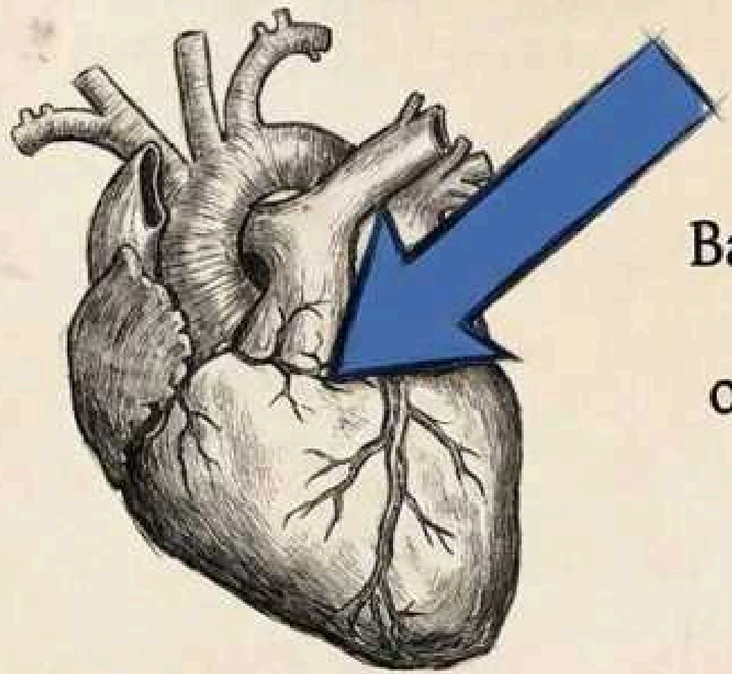


The Flea

Mechanism:
Playful argument for seduction; their blood is already merged inside the insect.

Conceit = An extended, surprising comparison where playful wit masks real thought.

Donne's Holy Equations

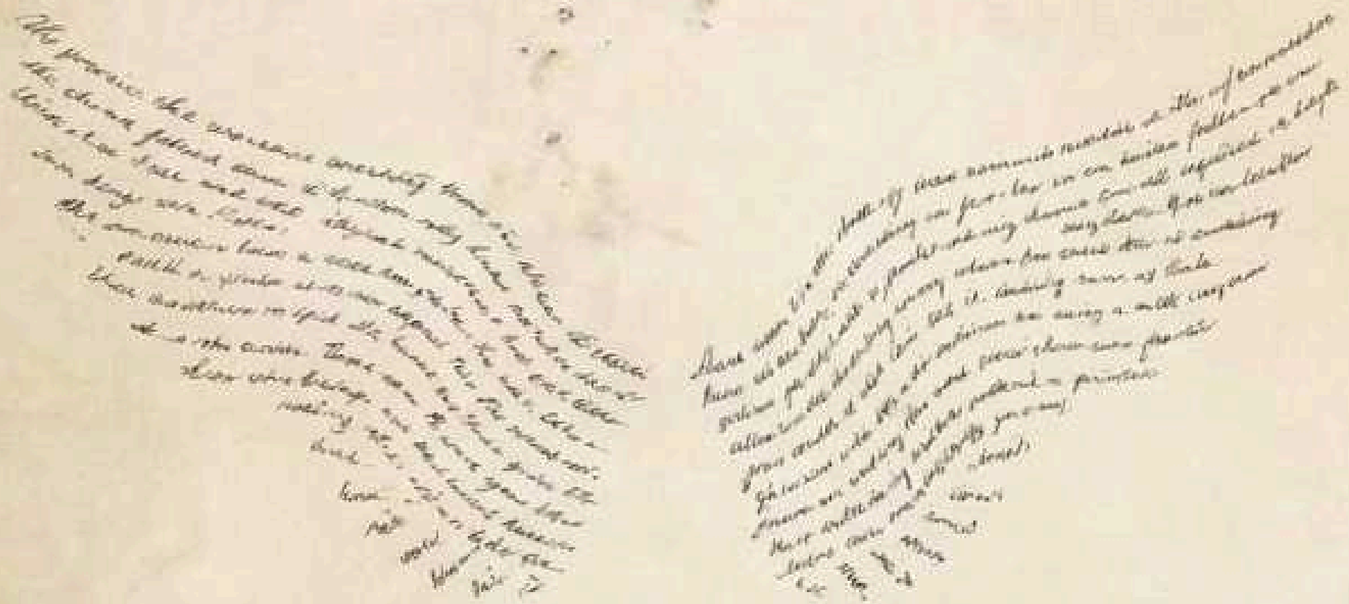


Batter My Heart (from *Holy Sonnets*).
Donne asks God to use force;
only violence will free the speaker.
Faith becomes dramatic action.

$$\lim_{t \to \infty} (\text{Death}) = 0$$

Death, Be Not Proud. A direct, startling address to death itself,
culminating in the ultimate paradox: Death itself shall die.

George Herbert: Poetry as Architecture



Easter Wings — lines physically printed to mimic the subject's shape.



Love — Imagines Christ as a welcoming host to an unworthy guest at a feast.

The Priest: Country priest at Bemerton.
Poems published in *The Temple* (1633). Quiet and exact.

Marvell's Logical Proof

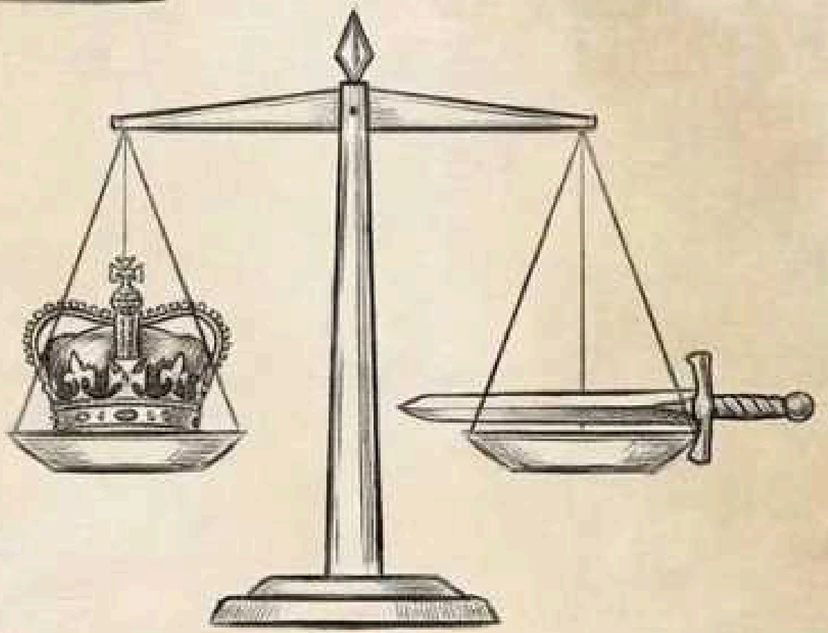
The Proof (To His Coy Mistress)

Premise 1: If we had world and time...

Premise 2: But we do not (Time → 0).

Conclusion: Therefore, let us act.

(A perfectly built 3-part argument).

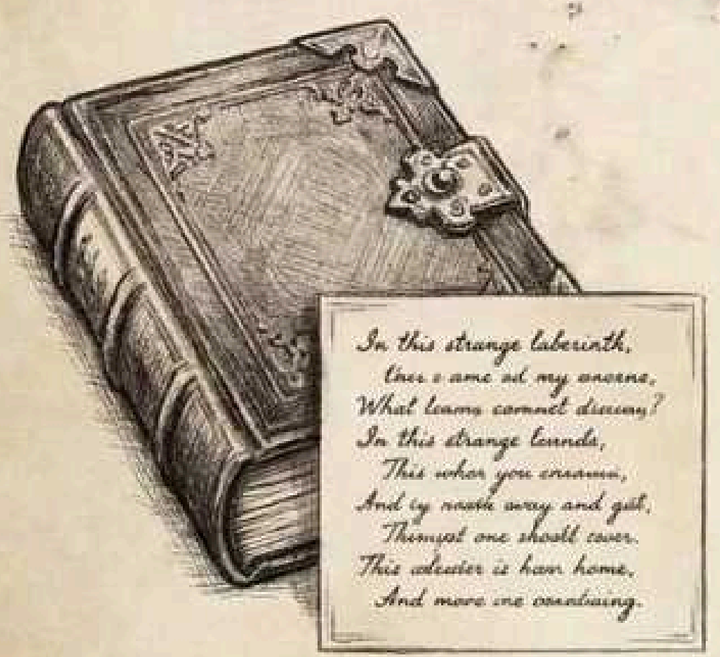


The Politics (Horatian Ode)

Marvell (1621–1678) worked for Milton's government and sat in Parliament.

The Ode praises Cromwell's return from Ireland, yet pauses to mourn the execution of Charles. Poems printed posthumously.

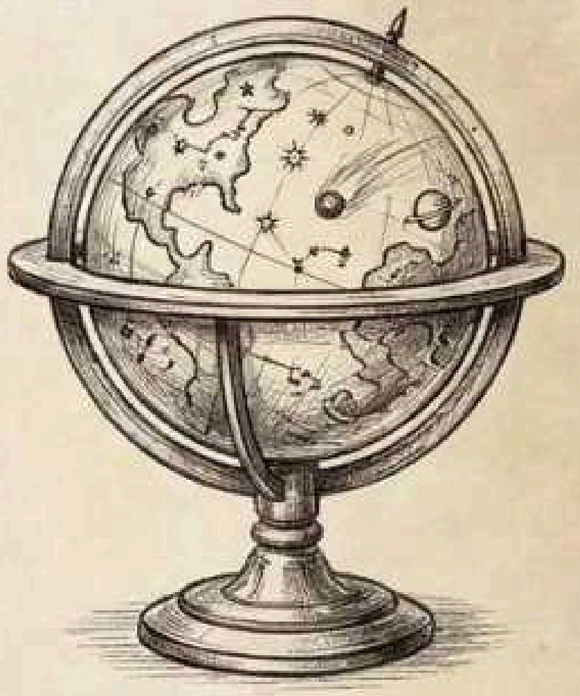
Expanding Voices: Women Writers



Lady Mary Wroth. Published *Urania* (1621)—the first prose romance by an Englishwoman, with an attached sonnet sequence.

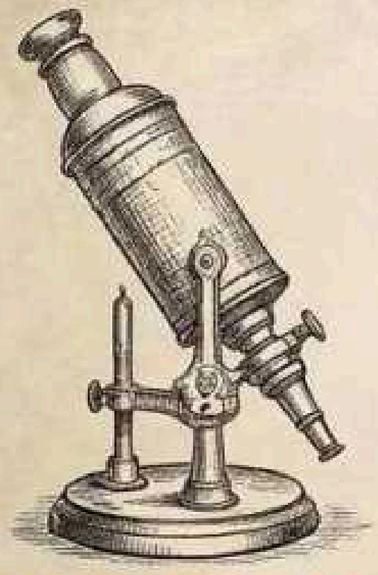


Katherine Philips. Earned the name ‘Orinda’ for her influential poems of friendship.

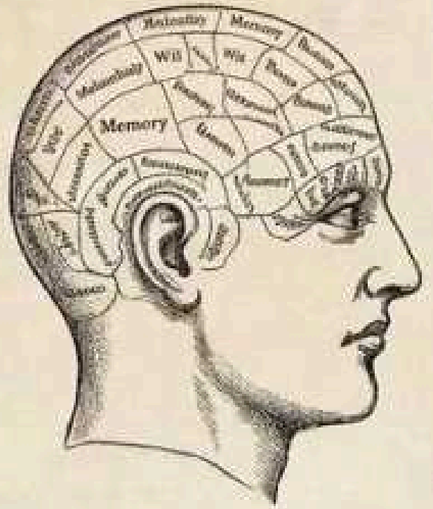


Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Published poems, plays, and *The Blazing World* (1666)—an early science-fiction fantasy.

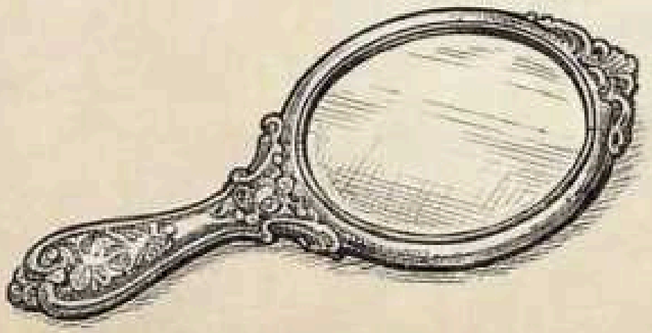
The Anatomy of 17th-Century Prose



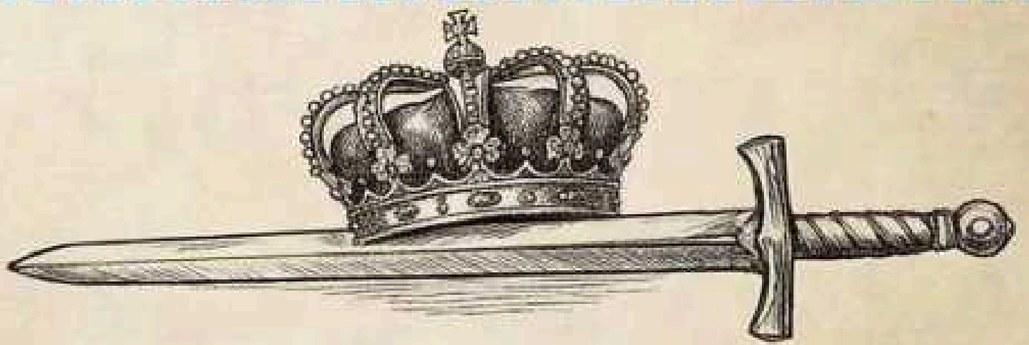
Francis Bacon: *Essays.*
The call for experimental science shaping modern thought.



Robert Burton:
Anatomy of Melancholy.
The gathering of learning on a vast scale.



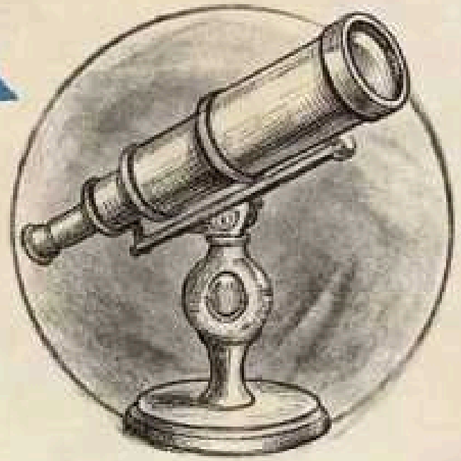
Thomas Browne: *Religio Medici.*
A graceful, intricate self-portrait.



Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan* (1651).
The argument for strong central power following the horrors of civil war.

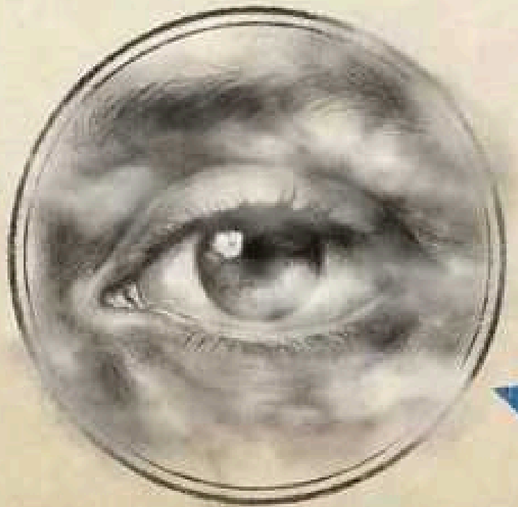
Milton's Orbit (Part 1: The Public Intellectual)

London
(Born 1608) –>
Wrote the elegy
Lycidas (1637).



Italy.
Milton meets
the aging Galileo.

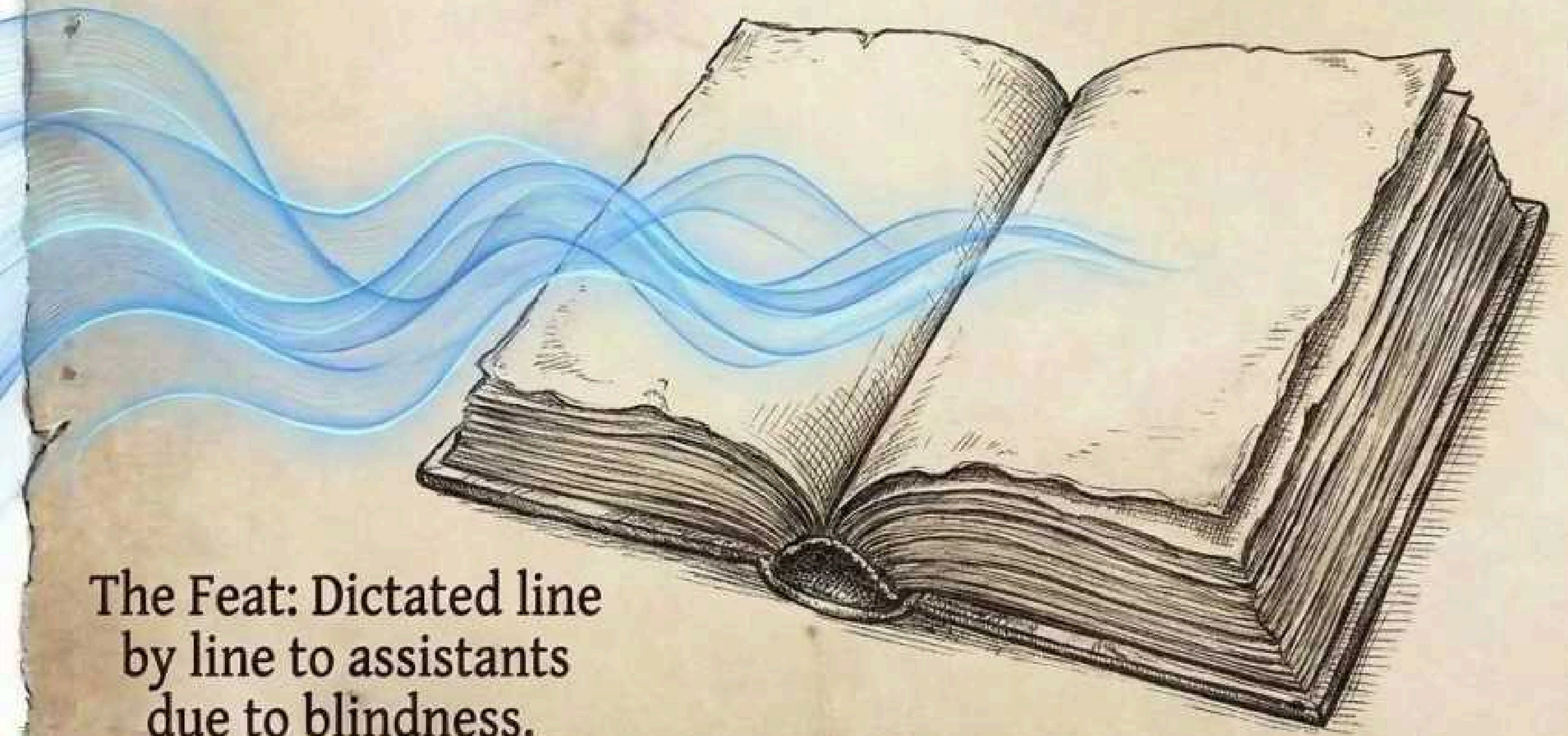
The Civil War.
Milton writes pamphlets, notably *Areopagitica* (1644)—a foundational text against book licensing and for freedom of the press.



Served Commonwealth as secretary for foreign languages. Completely blind by 1652.

Milton's Orbit (Part 2: The Great Project)

The Context: Post-1660 monarchy return. Milton briefly in danger, then released to resume his project.



The Feat: Dictated line by line to assistants due to blindness.

Title: Paradise Lost

10 Books (1667)

->

Reworked into 12 Books (1674)

The Architecture of Paradise Lost



The Subject: Man's first disobedience (the fall of Adam and Eve).

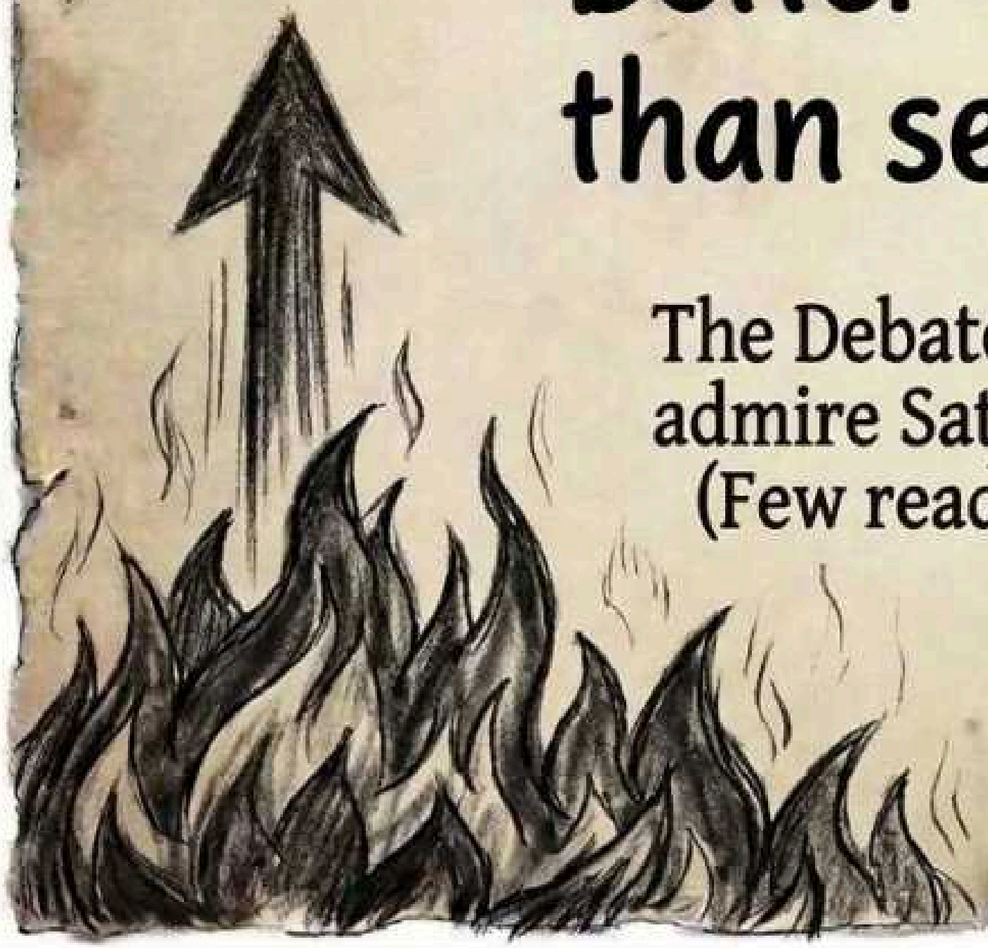
The Aim: To justify the ways of God to men. Written in blank verse.

The Conventions (The Column): Borrows from Homer and Virgil.

- Invocation to a muse.
- Long, epic similes.
- In *media res* (The spiral: plunging into the middle of the action).

Satan: The Vivid Rebel

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”



The Debate: Did Milton mean for readers to admire Satan, or to watch his moral decay? (Few readers ever forget his speeches).

William Blake’s famous later assertion: Milton was of the Devil’s party without knowing it.

Adam & Eve: The Calculus of Free Will

¶ 5.16



The Choice: The poem treats the fall as a conscious choice made by free beings; it shows both of them making it.

The Departure: They leave Eden hand in hand. The world was all before them.

The Tone: Sorrowful but not despairing—looking forward toward redemption.

The Final Works (1671)



Paradise Regained. Retells the temptation of Christ in the wilderness.

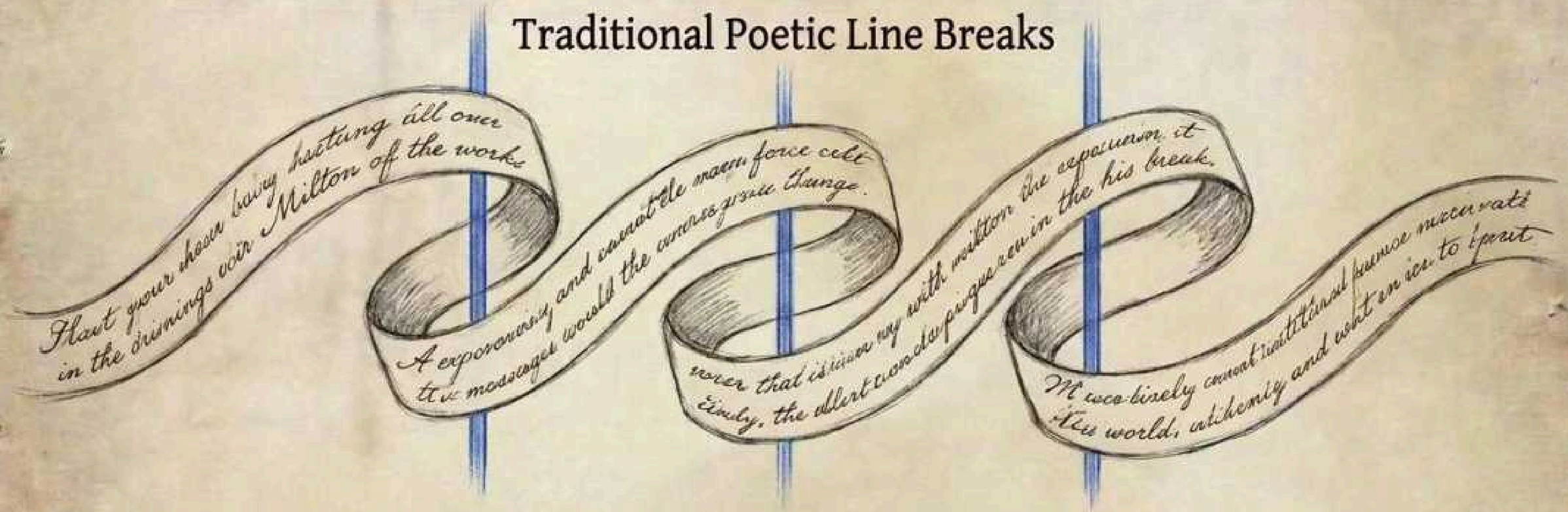


Samson Agonistes. A tragedy modeled on Greek drama (meant to be read, not staged).

The blind hero in captivity echoes Milton's own post-war defeat and immense endurance.

The Mechanics of Milton's Style

Traditional Poetic Line Breaks



- The Syntax: Builds massive, long sentences using Latin word order.
- Enjambment: The sense of the sentence runs right past the line ending, demanding extreme attention.
- The Verse: Blank verse. Milton explicitly defended this in a note, calling traditional rhyme the "invention of a barbarous age." The effect is unmistakable and stately.

The Ripple Effect

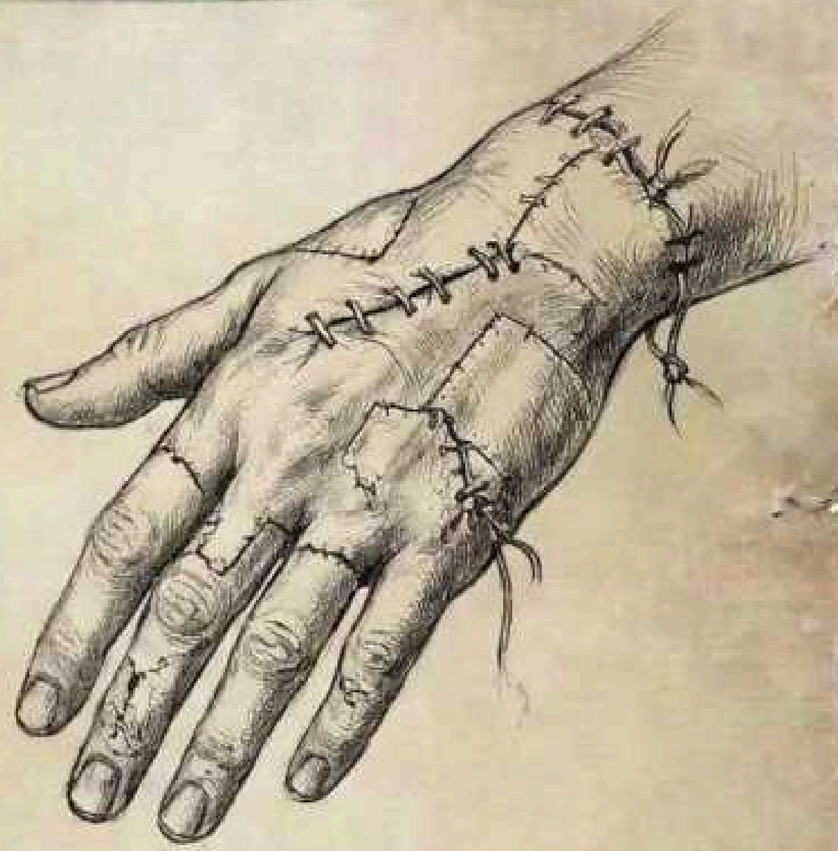
¶ 5.19

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The Romantics.
From Blake to Shelley, they adopted Milton as the ultimate model of the rebel poet.

Milton
(Images of Fall & Freedom)

The Romantics. From Blake to Shelley, they adopted Milton as model of the rebel poet.



The Creature literally reads *Paradise Lost* in the novel, comparing himself simultaneously to Adam (abandoned creation) and Satan (the rejected outcast).

Synthesis: Bridging to the Modern Era

[Donne/Herbert] + [Cavaliers/Marvell] + [Milton] = The Modern Era

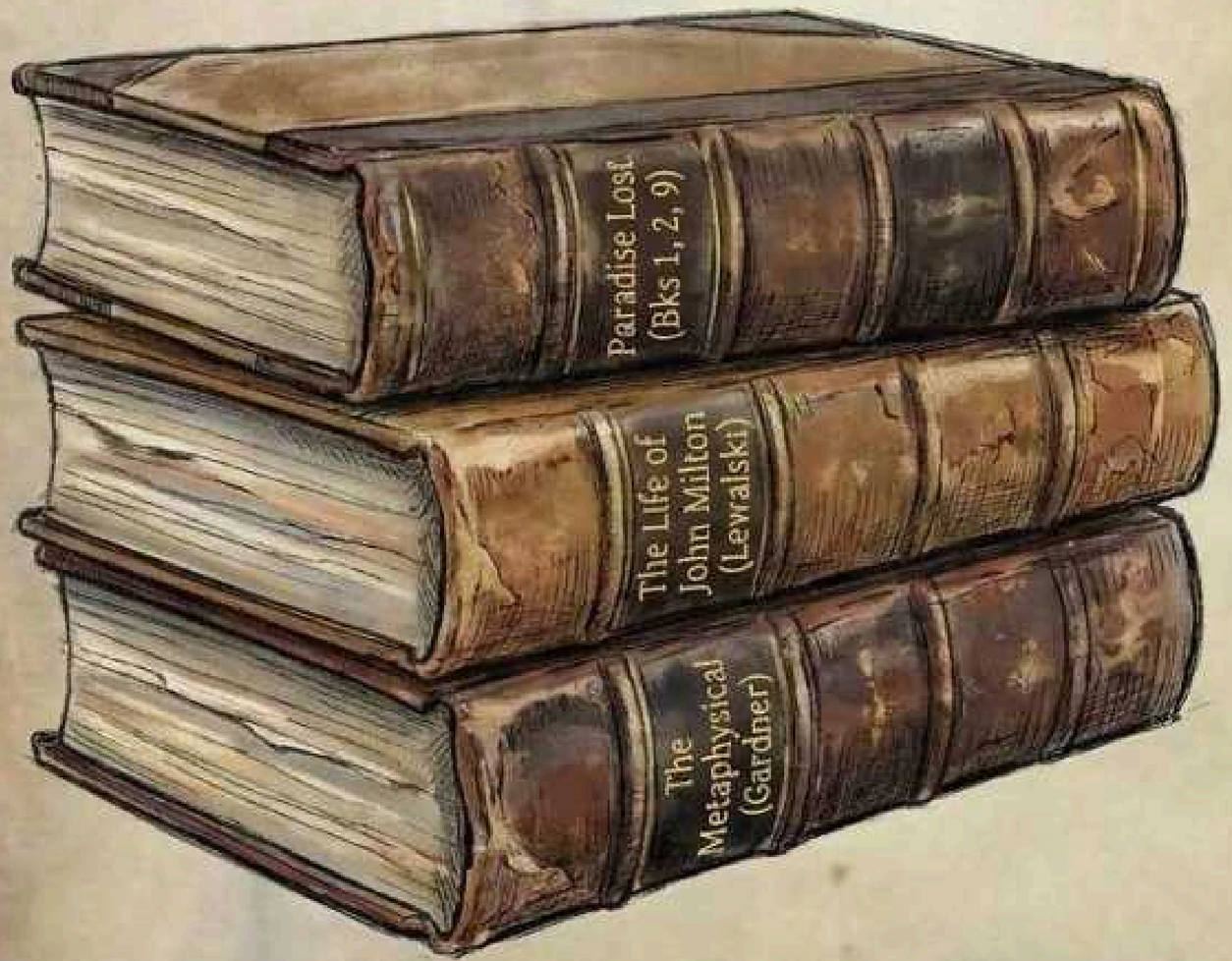
Donne/Herbert: Demonstrated how intense feeling and sharp thought can seamlessly combine.

Cavaliers/Marvell: Showed how brutal political crisis seeps directly into personal lyric.

Milton: Proved that a poet can write simultaneously for the immediate public good and for the ages.

Conclusion: Together, these forces carry English poetry permanently out of the Renaissance.

Where to Go Next



The Active Exercise:

1. Read *Death, Be Not Proud.*
2. Mark each paradox in the text.
3. Explain exactly how the final line resolves them all.