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Milton's Two-Handed Engine

The paper proposes a new solution to "perhaps the most famous crux in English literature," a solution that provides further evidence of Milton's excellence as a Hellenist and his sophistication as a reader of Classical and biblical texts. The "two-handed engine at the door" that "stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" concludes St Peter's speech in Milton's *Lycidas*. The clue to understanding the image is to be found in the concluding lines of Theocritus 7, the poem that inspired Milton's choice of the pastoral name "Lycidas." (In Theocritus, the herdsman Lycidas prays for a safe journey by sea for his friend Ageanax; Milton's poem is a lament for a friend who died in a shipwreck, Edward King.) Theocritus' poem ends with the narrator's prayer that he may again plant the great winnowing fan in the heap of Demeter's grain. Certain references that begin to appear toward the end of Theocritus 7 indicate (as Milton seems to have recognized) that the poet is recalling Teiresias' infernal injunction to Odysseus that he plant his oar in the ground (*Od.* 11. 129) when he meets a man who confuses his oar with a winnowing fan.

The "two-handed engine," it is proposed, is a winnowing fan, which is indistinguishable from an oar. It is two-handed both in the sense that oars and winnowing fans involve two-handed operation and in the sense that the object itself is liable to two distinct interpretations. Evidence will be presented that, at the time *Lycidas* was written, "two-handed" could be used to mean "capable of two or more interpretations." The advantage of this identification is that this appropriately ambiguous object is suitable both (as winnowing fan) to Milton's pastoral setting and (as oar) to the speaker of the lines, "the pilot of the Galilean lake," as well as to the maritime disaster that the poem memorializes. Also, by its implicit reference to Odysseus' successful final voyage and his easy death coming in prosperous old age it anticipates the conclusion of the poem, in which the shipwrecked Lycidas is promised eternal life "in the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love." Finally, the winnowing fan is a potent biblical metaphor for judgment and divine punishment: According to John the Baptizer, the Messiah's winnowing fan "is ready in his hand and he will winnow his threshing-floor" (Matthew 3. 12, New English Bible). And indeed it is in the context of judgment and divine punishment that Milton's two-handed engine is introduced. For St Peter refers to it as the instrument that "stands ready to smite" the corrupt clergy who are the objects of his condemnation