

**JOHN MILTON: ON HIS BLINDNESS AND HIS CONCEPT OF SERVICE****ჯონ მილტონი: მისი სიბრმავისა და მისი მომსახურების კონცეფციის შესახებ****EDWARD R. RAUPP**

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**Abstract**

Although it is *Paradise Lost* that receives much of the attention from scholars of John Milton, his most often quoted words may well be the last line of his Sonnet XIX, *When I consider how my light is spent*. That last line is, “They also serve who only stand and wait.” The key to understanding the essence of the sonnet is to understand the contentious issue of salvation that divides the Roman Catholic Church from those who “protest” against the church and argue for reform, from the followers of Martin Luther in the 16th century to the Puritans of Milton’s 17th century. This study samples the literature addressing Milton and his life and times, as well as critical comment on the sonnet, but it goes deeper, using close reading of the sonnet itself. The issue in contention is whether, as Catholic church doctrine maintains, “good works” are sufficient for salvation, or, as Luther claims, justification is by faith alone. What we find in Milton is something new, which is that faith is primary, but that the faithful will perform good works as a matter of obedience to God’s commands. When Milton loses his physical sight, he gains spiritual light, which he expresses in the sonnet. His use of the Parable of the Talents raises the question of whether being blind is an excuse for not using his talent as a writer to praise God. The last line of the sonnet answers that question.

**Keywords:** John Milton, sonnets, blindness, service**Introduction**

In a typical university syllabus for the study of the works of John Milton, the focus and most of the class time and study assignments will center on *Paradise Lost* (MIT, 2020). This should not be a surprise, as that work is widely considered “The greatest epic poem in the English language” (Ramm, 2017). This paper has no quarrel with those for whom *Paradise Lost* best represents the work of John

Milton. Instead, we choose to examine another of Milton's works, one of the most famous poems in the English language (Robins, 1956). and most assuredly one of the most often quoted lines of English poetry, the last line of his Sonnet XIX (Orgel & Goldberg, 2008, p. 81, as Sonnet 16):

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent

To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide;  
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed

And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:  
*They also serve who only stand and wait.*

In our close reading of that line, we examine the first of the three verbs and explore both the implications of that word and some inferences based on what we know about the life of John Milton and, in particular, the dictates of his religion. It remains for another time to examine the other two verbs in that line. Our interest in this study is the word "serve," and we intend to explore both the definition (Etymology, 2020) and Milton's concept of what it means to serve.

### **The Research Question**

The research question here is, How does Milton intend for his readers to understand his blindness and the concept of service in light of his own religious beliefs?

Throughout the sonnet, the motif is clearly Milton's relationship to his God, specifically one in which the speaker is a servant of his Maker. That relationship appears to derive from Jesus' Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30 (Robins, 1956, p. 362; Haskin, pp. 29-53; Herron, pp. 23-28), and the context, from the first line of the sonnet, is Milton's blindness, which was total at the time of his writing in 1655. Urban (2004) writes, "...while a fair amount of Milton criticism has discussed the poet's fascination with the Parable of the Talents ...surprisingly little has addressed his proclivity to think of himself as a version of the unprofitable servant" (p. 1). Milton asks how he can serve God with his talent of writing given that his sight is gone. His readers, then, are similarly encouraged to ask themselves the same question.

We choose to examine the sonnet and its emphasis on serving in order to understand the meaning of the concept of service as Milton intended it and as we might find that concept relevant to the age in which we live (Greenleaf, 2015). It is the unfortunate case that some leaders prefer to

consider their situation as one of unbridled privilege rather than that of service to those they lead (Coetzer, Bussin, and Geldenhuis, 2017).

## Methods

This study of Milton's blindness and his concept of service uses both the traditional method of literature review and the more modern method of close reading.

### The Traditional Method

The traditional method of research in philology involves the review of published articles and books. It provides a broad view of the topic, as well as a variety of perspectives from Milton scholars. There is an abundance of material available for research into the works of Milton in general and his poetry in particular. This includes critical commentary of relevance to this study. In the 365 years since Milton wrote his Sonnet XIX, "When I consider how my light is spent," thousands of books have been published along with critical articles in international journals (Dartmouth College, 2020). This study samples a few such pieces, including, *inter alia*, Barker, Beer, Duran, Mukundarajan, Robins, Slakey, and Stroup. In agreement with many others, Beer, 2008, refers to Sonnet XIX as "One of his most famous poems" (p. 253). Review of the literature was the first step in this current study. It involved careful analyses of the material, side-by-side comparisons and contrasts, and discoveries of common threads of conclusion among the various writers. While this method is useful in a survey of the scholarly literature, it tends to be broad, perhaps too broad for our purposes.

We should also note that the sonnet has been used in contexts other than that intended by the author. Note especially Jones (2020) with its reference to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The appropriation by Jones of the last line of the sonnet refers to people staying at home.

### Close Reading

Because of the limitations of the traditional method of the review of literature, we chose to use a second method, the more modern method of close reading. Burke (2020) defines close reading as "thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text's form, craft, meanings, etc." It is this latter understanding that is the aim of this current research.

While the traditional literature review is the start of the research, it is the second method, close reading, that this study uses to explore the deeper meanings and the nuances of Milton's Sonnet XIX and the last line of that sonnet. Graf, G. (1987) notes that the technique of close reading emerged in Britain in the 1920s in the work of I. A. Richards, William Empson, and T.S. Eliot, all of whom sought to replace the dominant "impressionistic" view of literature with a "practical criticism" focused on language and form.

It can be argued that Milton embeds in every line, in every word, more meaning than may be apparent in a first reading. That is certainly the case in Sonnet XIX, from the first word, "When," to

the last word, “wait.” In the current study, our focus is on Line 14: *They also serve who only stand and wait*, with its connection to those parts of Lines 5 and 11 that contain earlier mentions of the verb “serve.”

The first word of Line 14, “They,” may be inferred to mean “He,” as Milton may not be so much thinking about others as about himself and his condition of blindness. “Also,” the second word of the line, implies that others, including Milton in his pre-blindness state, serve God by “good works,” making use of their (his) talents (Matthew 25:14–30). Then we come to the third word, “serve,” and this is where the Puritan-vs.-Catholic dispute comes to the surface. Milton’s virulent anti-Catholic disposition precludes his meaning that the path to salvation is “good works,” a fundamental principle of Catholic doctrine. Instead, we must go back some 130 years before, back to the 95 theses of Martin Luther, to the foundation of the Protestant Reformation: “Justification by faith alone” (Fredriksen, 2014). The rest of the line then falls into place.

In our treatment of Milton’s tractate, “Of Education,” we noted, “To be a Puritan is to be, by definition, a reformer. To be a Puritan is to be a seeker. To be a Puritan is to be a change agent. Milton is all of these things, and he is, by his own admission, an iconoclast” (Raupp, 2020, p. 36). We should note that Puritanism is not without its critics, even within the Protestant communities. This is illustrated vividly in the attack on Puritanism by Anne Hutchinson. Williams (2014) notes, “The main foundation of the Puritan faith was to lead a decent and moral life that pleased God, and thus, in a way, they created for themselves a foundation of sanctification for their entire faith.” Winship (2001) notes, of the early Puritans within the Church of England, “Despite an emphasis on faith, these ministers did not neglect good works” (p. 465).

Given Milton’s blindness, he is one “who can only stand and wait,” his path to salvation not in continuing to write but by faith alone. Milton makes clear his displeasure with the church—both Catholic and Church of England—in his ninety-page pamphlet *Of Reformation* (Flannagan, 1998, pp. 873-902).

## Results

Based on our close reading of Line 14 of Sonnet XIX, we find dispositive evidence of the connection between Milton’s blindness and his concept of service. Teskey (2009), for example, takes the line to mean, “He would...wait until some clear inspiration came to him” (p. 68). Further, we find in the poesy itself, including such techniques as repetition, some clear evidence of the connection.

## Repetition

In Sonnet XIX, Milton uses repetition as a technique to advance the twin motifs of blindness and service. Repetition is a technique of poesy. The poet is keenly aware of any use of the same word unless it is intended for some purpose. Otherwise, using the same word or phrase is an oversight damaging the integrity of the work. If, however, the repetition is intentional, then we should discern the intent of the writer in employing that technique. “Repeating the same words or phrases in a literary work of poetry or prose can bring clarity to an idea and/or make it memorable for the reader” (Literary Devices, 2020).

A close reading of Milton's Sonnet XIX reveals an incidence of repetition relevant to this study, the use of the word "serve." We find the word in the target of our interest, in the last line: "They also *serve* who only stand and wait." But we also find the word earlier, in line 5: "To *serve* therewith my Maker," and in line 11: "...who best/Bear his mild yoke, they *serve* him best." Assuming that Milton is far more than just a competent poet, we must conclude that his repetition of the word "serve" is not an accident. Rather, Milton intends for us to be drawn to the word—and to the concept of service.

### **Blindness**

John Milton is not the only genius to be deprived of one of his most important senses. Ludwig van Beethoven began to notice a loss of hearing in 1798 at the age of 28 years. Beethoven did not stop using his talent because of his deafness. He wrote his first seven symphonies while losing his hearing. He wrote Symphonies 7, 8, and 9 while totally deaf (Cayers, 2020). As to blindness, Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel both lost their eyesight in their 60s (Wolff, 2020; Keates, 1985). Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles both composed and performed some of the most beloved popular music while completely blind (Smith, 1995; Biography, 2020).

Scholarly criticism of the Sonnet XIX tends to focus, as the common title of the poem suggests, "on his blindness." Indeed, lending evidence to this reading, the other incidence of repetition in the sonnet is the word "light," clearly a metaphor for the sense of sight. In this study, we examine the nexus of sight and service. The principal result of the study is that there is a meaningful, intended relationship. At the outset, we ask, How does Milton intend for his readers to understand his blindness and the concept of service in light of his own religious beliefs?

### **Service**

Cheek (1965) refers to "the three citations from the *New Testament*," in which "one discovers: first, that the imagery informing this sonnet is almost wholly scriptural" (p. 130). Those three passages are the "Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25:14–30; the "Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" in Matthew 20:1–16; and John 9:4: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (Herron, 1968, p. 26) Fiske (1974, p. 46) writes that John 9:4 "is a command because it is a pattern for man" and is a clear reference to Milton's blindness. This admonition of Jesus is in the context of his healing a blind man, from which Milton takes not the physical healing, for which he holds no hope, but the coming to God through grace.

Our results reveal a curious anomaly in the literal and metaphorical lines of Sonnet XIX. On the one hand, Milton expresses his passion for serving God: "...though my soul more bent/To serve therewith my Maker." But Jesus says, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45). The anomaly is the subject of theology and is best left to the clerics. It does, however, open the door to a discussion of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 2015; Coetzer,

Bussin, and Geldenhuis, 2017). Milton seems not to mention the comment that Jesus makes about his being a servant. Rather, his focus is entirely on serving God in some way, that way being writing. So it raises the question, “What does it mean to serve God?” (Piper 2020). It is common Christian theology that God does not need anything from humans but that humans need salvation through God’s grace: “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:24-25. KJV). We infer from Milton’s sonnet that he is in agreement with Joshua (24:15), “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,” and with the Psalmist (100:1-2): “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.”

Milton’s imperative to serve God answers our research question: His blindness is not an impediment to his serving God but a blessing. His physical darkness is overcome by his more powerful spiritual enlightenment.

There remains a highly controversial issue in any analysis of Milton’s concept of service, whether service to God is contingent on “good works” or “faith alone.” Lowrie (1952) notes that “the doctrine of ‘justification by faith alone’...” was the signal for the Western Schism and is commonly regarded as the distinction of Protestantism” (p. 231). For Lowrie, it is not that faith is essential for salvation, but that the word “alone” is a 16th century addition to the Gospel and to the letters of Paul.

## Discussion

Barbara Lewalski’s comprehensive treatment of Milton’s life is one of the most authoritative works on Milton’s life and works (2003). The reader of this current study is encouraged to visit the Lewalski book for essential details about the life and times of the man. John Milton was born in Cheapside, London, on December 9, 1608, became completely blind at age 44 in 1652, and died one month before his 66th birthday on November 8, 1674. He likely wrote his sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent,” often referred to as “On his blindness,” in the mid-1650s while blind, dictating this and all subsequent works, including his epic poems, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and his “autobiographical, lyric drama” (Veldkamp, 1958), *Samson Agonistes* to amanuenses (Danielson, 1999). Orgel and Goldberg (2008, p. 81) number the work as Sonnet 16, as do McDowell and Smith (2009, p. 711) and Hanford (1921, p. 477), while other books and articles number it as Sonnet XIX (e.g., Beer, 2008, p. 456), the difference having to do with different publications of Milton’s collections. “The sonnet was first published in Milton’s 1673 Poems in his autograph notebook, known as the ‘Trinity Manuscript’ from its location in the Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. He gave it the number 19, but in the published book it was numbered 16, so both numbers are used for it.” (Kelley, 1956).

Both in Sonnet XIX and elsewhere, e.g., *The Second Defence of the People of England*, Milton bemoans his lot. “And that one talent which is death to hide/Lodg’d with me useless.” In *The Second Defence*, he further laments God’s treatment of him: “...he reproaches me with want of beauty and loss

of sight” (Perry, 1902, p. 29). Pequigney (1967) writes of “Milton’s poignant reaction to his own blindness, complaint terminating either in his stoic resignation to disablement or in the expectation of renewed productivity” (p. 485). But Milton has an epiphany, that the loss of physical sight is more than compensated by the gain of spiritual enlightenment. Sasek (1981) will “produce evidence that the onset of his blindness caused him to develop a new image of himself” (p. 17). In Sonnet XIX, Milton articulates the Puritan vision, based on Luther’s protest against the Catholic church’s embrace of good works, that salvation, or “justification” before God, is attained not by good works but by “faith alone.” While this view may be subject to the criticism that “faith without works is dead,” the response is that one who has true faith will do good works. In James 2:14, we have, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?”

Tisdall and Kelly (1924) describe Sonnet XIX in *The Irish Times* as “One of the finest poems in English literature on the sad affliction of blindness.” They write that “Milton’s sonnet breathes an air of resignation to the Will of God which finds expression in beautiful verse” (p. 164).

In Sonnet XIX, Milton tells us all we need to know about faith and good works from a Puritan perspective. He has done good works in writing to the glory of God. And he will continue to do so. The works before and after his blindness are a service to God, but they are the products of faith, not a condition for salvation. *They also serve who only stand and wait.*

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