

# THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WRITE, OR, HOW MILTON READ SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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This article is a study of how one poet read another, and of how that reading continues to travel among us. It is about how John Milton, going blind some three decades after Shakespeare's lifetime and caught up in his own tumultuous moment of the English Civil Wars, regicide followed by England's Commonwealth experiment, and the subsequent Restoration of monarchy, continued to read and engage with Shakespeare, and especially Shakespeare's sonnets.<sup>1</sup> Milton went blind over almost a decade: from 1644/5 to 1652/3. In the divide between royalists and republicans in seventeenth-century England, Milton sided decisively with the republicans. He defended the regicide of Charles I, worked hard for the Commonwealth government, and resisted the return of monarchy (in the form of Charles Stuart's coming to the throne as Charles II) until the last possible moment. All this, while steadily going blind and learning how to *be* blind as author and polemicist and poet. For us, today, the most significant poetic outcome of Milton learning to accommodate his blindness through his poetry, and of creating a blind poetics for himself, is *Paradise Lost*. But there were other poetic outputs, namely some remarkable sonnets, as Milton travelled into blindness and taught himself to write blind. All of Milton's lyric poetry from his final blind-going years in the 1650s, with the exception of his verse translations of Psalms 1–8 in 1653, were sonnets, as Milton radically adapted the form in English from lyric statements of love to expressions of political positions, principled statements of ethics, and

complex poetic desire. If one constant music accompanied Milton from his sighted days to his blind ones, it was that of poetry. And, as this article will show, Shakespeare remained one of the sustaining poetic companions for Milton on his journey into blindness.

Milton's involvement with Shakespeare went back at least a decade before his first inklings of blindness. Milton's first printed poem was his anonymously published 16-line almost-sonnet, all in couplets, entitled 'An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, W. SHAKESPEARE' as part of the preliminary matter for the 1632 second edition of *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.<sup>2</sup> Even then, it was 'my Shakespeare' (emphasis mine; line 1) whom Milton was ostensibly writing about. The recent identification of Milton's copy of Shakespeare's First Folio has helped bring into more robust conversation than ever Milton's deeply engaged readings of Shakespeare in what would have been some of Milton's last fully sighted days of pleasurably

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<sup>1</sup> We do not have direct evidence yet about Milton's engagement with Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry, but given the seriousness of Milton's engagement with Shakespeare's poetry in his dramatic works, and given Milton's own ambitions as a poet, I take it as a given that Milton knew of and engaged with Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, 'An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, W. SHAKESPEARE', in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, 2nd edn (London, 1632), sig. πA2r. Further references to this poem will appear in parentheses.

following recent and celebrated literary publications.<sup>3</sup> We cannot know precisely how much Milton continued to read his Shakespeare or to have his Shakespeare read to him as he came to rely more and more on the eyes of his companions, amanuenses, caregivers, friends and family – or how and exactly when his actual reading of Shakespeare became a memoried reading of the earlier poet. But somewhere in Milton's intellectual, emotional and poetic journey into blindness, particular ideas, phrases and concepts from Shakespeare's sonnets became, I suggest, incandescent for Milton, and spurred their own Miltonic sonnet engagements.

Without asserting anything like a direct source study and certainly without aiming to be exhaustive, and offering only that Milton takes a Shakespeare-sonnet-music with him into his blindness through the affordances of his own prodigious memory, I want in this article to read mainly two Shakespeare sonnets with two Milton sonnets which demonstrate Milton's active incorporation of his reconstructions, reverberations and syntheses of his sighted and past readings into blind sonnets.<sup>4</sup> (It is perhaps to be expected that Milton, who decades earlier positioned the 'admirable Dramaticke Poet' Shakespeare as the 'Sonne of Memory' – line 5 of the 'Epitaph' – should later himself by memory follow the earlier poet.)<sup>5</sup> The Shakespeare sonnets, I submit, remain places for the blind Milton's continued examination of Shakespeare's treatments of time, transience, loss, responsibility and the power of poetry.

In the first section, I read Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, 'When I consider every thing that growes', with Milton's sonnet 'On His Blindness' (a title editorially introduced long after Milton's death; Milton's first line is 'When I consider how my light is spent').<sup>6</sup> In the following section, I read Shakespeare's Sonnet 43, 'When most I winke then doe mine eyes best see' – with reference also to contemporary poet Imtiaz Dharker's poetic response to Shakespeare's Sonnet 43, 'The Trick' – together with Milton's sonnet 'Methought I saw my late espoused Saint'.

Through my examination of these two Milton sonnets that expressly conjugate his blindness with his poetry, I argue, first, that Milton's engagement with Shakespeare's *Sonnets* gave him a poetic lexicon for discussing the ways and byways of his own visual loss, and, second, that something about the Shakespearian claim of a poet's ability to conjure reality itself (the yearning and the insistence of 'I ingraft you new') shapes Milton's blind reconfirmation of himself into poetic agency, time and purpose.<sup>7</sup> They also serve, Milton asserts as he stands in the wake of Shakespeare, who only stand and write.

#### AT WAR AND PEACE WITH TIME

*Shakespeare's Sonnets Neuer before Imprinted* (London, 1609) is full of clusters of poems that pick up particular conceits, concerns and arguments, and interrogate them in sonnet fashion. In the first such cluster, where the narrator of the poems seems to be urging a fair youth towards procreation, Shakespeare's Sonnets 15–18 constitute

<sup>3</sup> See Claire M. L. Bourne and Jason Scott-Warren, "'Thy unvalued booke': John Milton's copy of the Shakespeare First Folio", *Milton Quarterly* 56 (2022), 1–85.

<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Guy-Bray, 'Different Samenesses', in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> See Milton, 'An Epitaph'.

<sup>6</sup> The naming of Milton's sonnet 'When I consider how my light is spent' as 'On His Blindness' by Thomas Newton in the eighteenth century possibly followed the editorial appellation of another of Milton's poems by another of Milton's editors in the previous century. In 1694, Milton's nephew Edward Phillips had published a translation of Milton's *Litterae pseudo-senatus Anglicani* (published surreptitiously in Amsterdam, 1676) as the *Letters of State, written by Mr. John Milton, to most of the sovereign princes and republics of Europe. From the year 1649. till the year 1659. To which is added, an account of his life. Together with several of his poems; and a catalogue of his works, never before printed*. This volume published Milton's sonnet beginning 'CYRIAC this Three years day, these Eyes though clear' as 'To Mr. CYRIAC SKINNER Upon his Blindness'.

<sup>7</sup> Sonnet 15.14. All citations from Shakespeare's sonnets are from the first publication of *Shakespeare's Sonnets Neuer before Imprinted* (London, 1609). All citations from Milton's sonnets, unless otherwise mentioned, are from his *Poems, & c. upon Several Occasions* (London, 1673).

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a sub-cluster of their own, with the poems breaking explicitly into assertions of poetic agency (albeit not unquestioned ones) and the capacities of poetry to shape reality (again, certainly questioned ones). In this section of my article, I focus mainly on Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 and Milton's Sonnet 19 together, reading for echoes, carryings-over and transcreations of Shakespeare's poems as Milton blindly remakes what he has read and can remember/re-member.

'When I consider', begins Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, likely giving Milton the opening of one of the most beautiful poems ever composed, his own Sonnet XVI (as identified in Milton's 1673 *Poems*; this sonnet is by general editorial practice now identified as Milton's Sonnet 19) on his blindness.<sup>8</sup> Here are the poems:

### Shakespeare's Sonnet 15

When I consider every thing that growes  
Holds in perfection but a little moment.  
That this huge stage presenteth nought but showes  
Whereon the Stars in secret influence comment.  
When I perceive that men as plants increase,  
Cheared and checkt even by the selfe-same skie:  
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,  
And were their brave state out of memory.  
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay,  
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
Where wastfull time debateth with decay  
To change your day of youth to sullied night,  
And all in war with Time for love of you  
As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.

### Milton's Sonnet 19

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,  
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, least he returning chide,  
Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd,  
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 milde yoaik, they serve him best, his State  
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and waite.

'When I consider' and '[w]hen I perceive' the 'little moment' that any 'perfection' holds, says the narrator of Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, 'Then the conceit of this inconstant stay' spurs the poet to write the poems(s) that will remake the loveliness of the person addressed, even as relentless 'Time' takes away from that beloved's life and loveliness. It is almost as though Shakespeare has travelled unreally in time and read his Milton, for the main argument of Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 is: *When I consider how your light is spent, then I, through poetry, ingraft you new*. It is no accident that the opening of the later sonnet, Milton's, is a summative reverberation, albeit with a significant reversal, of the earlier Shakespearian one. Milton's 'When I consider' is entirely as preoccupied with time, transience and the coming on of night as Shakespeare's 'When I consider' is – but, in Milton's case, the poem carries the lived resonances of a blind reality. That the first line of Milton's sonnet essentially recapitulates Shakespeare's sonnet, with the poem then widening into a characteristically Miltonic exploration of its adopted Shakespearian themes, is the result of Milton's carrying his Shakespeare with him into poetic probing of his acquired blindness. The poets consider similar matters: intense loveliness and love; poetic talents and the powers thereof; human responsibilities in the face of the ceaseless passage of time. Yet the sonnets are also widely different in mood, tone and preoccupation, and part of the pleasure of considering them together must remain in the intensity of their differences that nevertheless

<sup>8</sup> Significantly, several writers – back to Milton have used this opening for their own sonnets. See, for instance, Nuala Watt's 'On her partial blindness', in *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back*, ed. Sandra Alland, Khairani Barokka and Daniel Sluman (Rugby, 2017), p. 150; and Tyehimba Jess's sonnet 'When I consider how my light is spent' ('Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Milton Society of America' booklet, circulated 2017). I have written elsewhere on the sonnets of Milton and Tyehimba Jess together: 'When they consider how their light is spent: intersectional race and disability studies in the classroom', in *Teaching Race in the European Renaissance: A Classroom Guide*, ed. Matthieu Chapman and Anna Wainwright (Tempe, AZ, 2023), 161–86.

also announce their proximities and common grounds through the very words, concepts and figurations they use. As I show below through three remarkable instances of borrowing – or even transcreation – Milton reads and repurposes precisely the obsessions that Shakespeare's poem grapples with.

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, the narrator is ostensibly addressing a youth whose splendid 'day' and prime he, the narrator, registers to be at risk of the 'sullied night' of death. This is all perfectly poetically done by Shakespeare. The poet harnesses the vast figurative powers of antitheses such as day/night, light/dark and life/death. But Milton, in his blindness, has the ambiguous privilege of knowing 'night' both as a figuration of death and as the 'darkness' (which is yet another layer of figuration) of visual loss. Critics such as Georgina Kleege and M. Leona Godin point out that blindness is seldom in fact a darkness. Very few blind persons perceive no light at all. Yet the association between blindness and darkness remains a prevailing one, born of the widely used and often mutually reinforcing figurative currencies of the words.<sup>9</sup> If Shakespeare activated the poetics of certain well-established poetic and linguistic dichotomies in his poem, Milton, as a blind poet, re-animates those dichotomies in an exercise also of the recovery of lived and literal meaning alongside the metaphorical.

Similarly, if Shakespeare's narrator is preoccupied with a certain youth of his acquaintance, Milton is, as well: his own. 'When I consider how my light is spent / *Ere half my days*' (emphasis mine), announces a poet who has so far felt old and belated, especially in terms of his poetic career. Until his visual spending of the light, his 'hasting dayes' had flown on with 'full career' while his 'late spring no bud or blossom' showed – even unto the stealing of that youth by that 'suttle thief' called 'time'.<sup>10</sup> Now, as he inhabits 'this dark world and wide' – a world whose disorienting wideness is a *consequence* of its darkness – the poet suddenly feels young, precipitously feels as though it is before even half his days that he has been thus compelled into his present and challenging situation.

Third: if in Shakespeare's sequence it was the narrator who did the chiding – the narrator's chiding of the fair youth towards procreation is less pronounced in Sonnet 15 than in many others, but Sonnet 15 is embedded within a very chain of chides that are the sonnets leading up to and proceeding on from it, and there is no way to quite absolve Sonnet 15 from that chiding – in Milton's sonnet, it is the poet's contemplation of a potential chiding that is the main trigger for the poem. With or without the intention to write 'back' to Shakespeare's poem, Milton's poem both intensifies the matter of chiding and raises the stakes of it for the person potentially being chided. What if God exacts 'day-labour' of one thrust into night by in fact being 'light deny'd', he wonders? What is one whose 'one Talent' lodges with him 'useless' supposed to do in the onrush of a final expiry of time and a yet more final reckoning about what one did with the time one was given? What if one *wants* to serve one's 'Maker' with their 'one Talent' and 'true account' – but, by circumstance, physically and actionably cannot? It turns out that despite the poet's claims to the contrary, 'patience' cannot quite 'prevent / That murmur' of questions and anxiety in Milton, for a blind poet recalls what he used to be able to do; what abilities (and perhaps perfection) he had worked hard to attain; and what various poets before him (such as the biblical poets and Shakespeare) have had to say about the need to do what one has to do while it is still day. For 'the night cometh, when no man can work'.<sup>11</sup>

Time devours apace in Shakespeare's poem. It appears that there is no relationship that the poet can have with Time that is not adversarial. In love elsewhere, the poet is naturally at war with Time: 'all in war with Time for love of you'. It is also

<sup>9</sup> See especially Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, 1999), p. 22, and M. Leona Godin's *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness* (New York, 2022), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> See Milton's Sonnet VII (first published in his 1645 *Poems* and reproduced in his 1673 *Poems*), lines 1–4.

<sup>11</sup> See 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.'

made clear that there is no way to leave one's mark in the relentless passage of time except through poetry. As Time takes away (from the poet's beloved), the poet makes (his beloved) anew through poetry. The poet's work does not brook the passage of time; instead, it *enters* it, meaningfully and monumentally. Being human, Milton too is caught up in that inexorable passage of time. But Milton seems to set himself the peculiar challenge of slowing time down – by the simple means of standing still in it. In his sonnet, something about the condition of being somatically 'light deny'd' arrests the poet's headlong fall into the metaphors of life versus death, day versus night, light versus dark. Despite the narrator's professed anxieties about the passing of time and the spending of the day (throughout the octet), by the sestet of Milton's sonnet, the pace and rhythm of the poem, and almost time itself, wind down. Time becomes at once an instrument of fulfilment, an agent of a peculiar fruition, and a maturity of thought and purpose.<sup>12</sup> Proto-cinematically, the whole world picks up pace until 'Thousands at his bidding speed / And post o're Land and Ocean without rest'. In the midst of that tumult, velocity and activity, some only stand and take what has been given them to take. They wait. And time stands with them – stands still. With Milton's final line, 'They also serve who only stand and waite', for just a moment, everything holds still. Past the superb enjambments and gathering speed of the first four lines of the sestet, the last two lines, although not in fact a couplet, almost behave like one. The lines are end-stopped, with the 'without rest' at the end of the poem's penultimate line astonishingly uniting both great pace and its utter restraint, and every monosyllabic word in the final line – which is every word save 'also' and 'only' – slowing the poem into completion and quiet at the same time. At the final 'wait', the instant expands. All time, all rest and all endurance belong to these that stand still and carry the particular weight that they have been given to carry. We understand that Milton is one of those who stand, stand still, hold time still, and keep time from drawing into night notwithstanding the spending of the light. On

Milton's part, and as Milton has told us without telling us in so many words (for Milton makes no direct reference to eyes or sight or the lack of sight in his poem), it is a blind person's standing still, a blind poet's waiting. What can the blind poet do more than wait? What can the blind poet do less than wait?

Where Milton's poem leaves off is not, however, antithetical to where Shakespeare's does. Even as Shakespeare resorted ultimately to poetry, so has Milton. The narrator in Shakespeare's sonnet is emphatic that he engrafts his beloved new: he writes the beloved into being through and as poetry. Milton does not expressly mention his poetic purpose. We are left to gather that he stands and waits, which is to say, he sits and dictates – and what results is poetry. Thus, there is a peculiar perpendicular resonance between the ends of the two sonnets, as well. What Shakespeare horticulturally and authorially 'ingrafts' new necessarily stands still, as does the final figure in Milton's poem by another necessity. Milton's poem assumes the mood of that last quiet in Shakespeare's poem with his assertion about the standing use of his own talent.

A sustained gift of Shakespeare's sonnets is in their ability to speak to the many moods of love in which human beings find themselves. Shakespeare's most powerful answer to the condition of perfect helplessness that is falling in love, is, of course, poetry itself.<sup>13</sup> To read Milton through Shakespeare today is to understand anew the power of that answer. Milton is a different poet, in need of a different power in poetry – yet Shakespeare makes possible for Milton what he needs in his moment. But to read Shakespeare then back through Milton – namely, through Shakespeare's

<sup>12</sup> See also J. K. Barrett, "'Enduring 'injurious time': alternatives to immortality and proleptic loss in Shakespeare's Sonnets', in *The Sonnets: The State of Play*, ed. Hannah Crawforth, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Clare Whitehead (London, 2017), 137–56.

<sup>13</sup> I take the phrase 'perfect helplessness' from the title of Robin Coste Lewis's stunning book *To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness* (New York, 2022), in which, too, the response to a fierce and necessary love is in and through poetry.



poetry's percolated involvement in another human life of hard hope and harder writing – is to know the strange truth of Shakespeare's claim of the poet's grafting things new; to know poetry as both a measure of what is impossibly dreamed and unreasonably brought into being; and to grasp poetry as a force that works in compounding potency as it passes through the hands of poets who write as though their lives – and afterlives – depend on their very words.

In my [next section](#), I show through another set of poems how Milton remakes his Shakespeare towards finding language for yet another love: a lost love, an always-love and a present grief that is, nevertheless, poetry.

#### DARKLY BRIGHT, AND BRIGHT IN DARK DIRECTED

Imtiaz Dharker's gorgeous sonnet 'The Trick' is a poetic response to Shakespeare's Sonnet 43.<sup>14</sup> To me, however, the journey from Shakespeare's poem to Dharker's is marked most luminously by way of Milton's sonnet addressed to his 'late espoused Saint' (Milton's Sonnet XIX as identified in his 1673 *Poems*; this poem is numbered '23' in the Trinity College Manuscript of Milton's poems and thus often referred to as Milton's Sonnet 23).<sup>15</sup> Here are the poems, in chronological order of composition across the decades and centuries.

##### Shakespeare's Sonnet 43

When most I winke then doe mine eyes best see,  
For all the day they view things unrespected;  
But when I sleepe, in dreames they looke on thee,  
And darkely bright, are bright in darke directed.  
Then thou whose shaddow shaddowes doth make  
bright,  
How would thy shadowes forme, forme happy show  
To the cleere day with thy much cleerer light,  
When to un-seeing eyes thy shade shines so?  
How would (I say) mine eyes be blessed made,  
By looking on thee in the living day?  
When in dead night their faire imperfect shade,  
Through heavy sleepe on sightlesse eyes doth stay?  
All dayes are nights to see till I see thee,  
And nights bright daies when dreams do shew thee me.

##### Milton's Sonnet 23

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint  
Brought to me like *Alcestis* from the grave,  
Whom *Joves* great Son to her glad Husband gave,  
Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint.  
Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint,  
Purification in the old Law did save,  
And such, as yet once more I trust to have  
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,  
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:  
Her face was vail'd, yet to my fancied sight,  
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd  
So clear, as in no face with more delight.  
But O, as to embrace me she enclin'd  
I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.

##### Dharker's 'The Trick'

In a wasted time, it's only when I sleep  
that all my senses come awake. In the wake  
of you, let day not break. Let me keep  
the scent, the weight, the bright of you, take  
the countless hours and count them all night through  
till that time comes when you come to the door  
of dreams, carrying oranges that cast a glow  
up into your face. Greedy for more  
than the gift of seeing you, I lean in to taste  
the colour, kiss it off your offered mouth.  
For this, for this, I fall asleep in haste,  
willing to fall for the trick that tells the truth  
that even your shade makes darkest absence bright,  
that shadows live wherever there is light.<sup>16</sup>

We don't know the precise date or circumstance of composition of Milton's Sonnet XIX/23, but it is not surprising that a blind-journeying and still-grieving Milton should find Shakespeare's sonnet treatments of love, sleep, dreams and waking strangely compelling and generative for his sonnet

<sup>14</sup> See the context in *On Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Poets' Celebration*, ed. Hannah Crawford and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (London, 2016), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> The Trinity College Manuscript can be viewed online at <https://mss-cat.trin.cam.ac.uk/Manuscript/R.3.4>; see especially p. 50 of the manuscript for this poem.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 14. Also available online, for example here: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/13/wendy-cope-simon-armitage-andrew-motion-shakespeare-love-sonnets-21st-century>.

treatment of a vision of his late partner.<sup>17</sup> Again, what Shakespeare experiences and writes as poetry – for poetry is not a luxury, as we know from Audre Lorde, and poetry *is* a witness, as we know from James Baldwin – Milton appropriately, blindly and in perfect reception and remaking, experiences as life and renders back as his own poetry.<sup>18</sup> I again map three connections between Shakespeare's and Milton's sonnets. Every suggestion, in Shakespeare, of what it is to inhabit a state of such longing that one's sleep and waking are confused, that actual sight and wished-for vision become hopelessly (and painfully hopefully) entwined, that absence and presence collide, and that physical shadow and ethereal form become indistinguishable, becomes, in Milton, a touchstone for further expansion of the conceit of such longing while also being a grounding of sense and association in ways that allow words to repeatedly return to their connotations and wander out again into new meanings. I close with a consideration of Dharker's poem, which uses the very energies of longing, dreaming and verbal making and re-making that Shakespeare activates and Milton transfigures.

Shakespeare's poem is expressly addressed to the absent beloved, and also explicitly full of eyes: when the eyes 'winke', they see their best; they view things 'unrespected' (as though not seeing particularly well because not respected, not *seen* very well); they 'looke on thee' in dreams of sleep; they 'un-seeing'-ly register 'thy shade' at night; they long to 'look' 'on thee' in the 'living day'; and they are 'sightlesse' in 'heavy sleepe' save in their perception of the shade/shadow/dream/form of the beloved. Milton's sonnet has no clear addressee – the central figure of/in the poem is referred to in the third person – and has not a single 'eye' in it; it must simply be understood that the eye-less authorial 'I' (the pronoun occurring at beginning, middle and end of the poem, in lines 1, 7 and 14) of the poem, of course, sees differently. The sonnet begins and ends with the poet's non-normative vision: his blindness. There is an absolute ownership of the (non-)visual condition at the heart of the poem, and the poet repeatedly refers to it: '[m]ethought' he saw something,

he says, deliberately skirting actual sight; what or whom he sees is somehow also 'vail'd' to him; 'yet once more' at some point in some future he trusts to have 'full sight' of what he sees; he has but a 'fancied sight' even at his acutest perceptive moment in the poem; and finally, he wakes to have day bring back his figurative night. What in Shakespeare's poem is the contemplation of and longing for an actual vision – an actual presence – is transformed, in Milton's study of his own layered experience of lost sight, companion and quotidian love, into yet another intense amalgamation of both sighted and blind manners of knowing the world and loving in it. 'For all the day they view things unrespected', the everyday blind Milton might say, with eyes that don't see and yet don't *look* like they don't see.<sup>19</sup> 'But when I sleepe, in

<sup>17</sup> Critics are still divided even on which late espoused saint Milton is writing about. Some critics have proposed that the subject of the poem is Milton's second wife, Katherine Woodcock: his 'late' or recently espoused wife, whose face had always been 'veiled' to Milton, for they had married in 1656, after he went blind, and whose name, from the Greek *katharos*, 'pure', may have inspired the phrase 'pure as her mind'. Others have proposed his first wife, Mary Powell, who died in 'child-bed', and whom Milton *had* seen in his sighted days, and may therefore 'yet once more . . . trust to have / Full sight of' in heaven. What we do know is that the writing of the poem in the Trinity College Manuscript is by one Jeremie Picard, who 'apparently began working as a scribe for Milton in 1658 and also entered the death notice for Katherine into Milton's family bible'. See *The Complete Works of John Milton*, vol. 3, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan (Oxford, 2012), p. xlviii, n. 75.

<sup>18</sup> See, particularly, Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is not a luxury', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, 2007), 36–9, and James Baldwin, 'Why I stopped hating Shakespeare', in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, 2010), 65–9.

<sup>19</sup> Milton's nephew and early biographer John Phillips described Milton as a man of 'handsom Features; save that his Eyes were none of the quickest. But his blindness, which proceeded from a Gutta Serena, added no further blemish to them.' See Helen Darbishire, *The Early Lives of John Milton* (London, 1932), p. 32. Milton would himself write, in his *Second Defence*: 'And yet they [the eyes] have as much the appearance of being uninjured, and are as clear and bright, without a cloud, as the eyes of men who see most keenly. In

dreames they looke on thee', he might add – for in dreams is now all his looking. Shakespeare's poetic evocation of night and sleep and the time of dreams as the site for charged non-ocular visions is like a gift to Milton: a vocabulary of longing and metaphor and paradox and power that he can renew in his own image.

The second significant gift of Shakespeare's poem for the purposes of Milton's sonnet is its commanding ambiguity. What the narrator in Shakespeare's poem waits for at the deep end of several series of words that are repeated into meaning differently and more ('darkely bright' and 'bright in darke'; 'shaddow shaddowes'; 'forme, forme') is 'a blessing so fiery and fierce it might not be able to be borne'.<sup>20</sup> There is both longing for and a kind of apprehension about the vision that might be, the presence that might be, if and when the beloved appears not merely in dreams but in living and breathing presence. In a not-entirely-idle couplet of questions, the poet asks:

How would (I say) mine eyes be blessed made,  
By looking on thee in the living day?  
When in dead night their faire imperfect shade,  
Through heavy sleepe on sightlesse eyes doth stay?<sup>21</sup>

Would – could – these eyes still see if the beloved in fact appeared before them? What if the sight were blinding bright? If even the imperfect shades (presumably) of the absent beloved's eyes penetrate the narrator's sightless ones through night's heavy sleep, what might the presence of, as it were, 'the real thing' do to the viewer/watcher/seer/lover? The particular peril involved here is better understood when we remember the extramission theory regarding the function of the eyes, which was prevalent in Shakespeare's time and place. The extramission theory of eyes' sight proposed that visual perception was accomplished by eye-beams physically emitted by eyes. During Milton's lifetime, and in the course of the seventeenth century, this theory of eyes' sight came to be largely replaced by the intromission theory of eyes' sight, which holds that light enters the eyes to make visual perception possible.<sup>22</sup> In a peculiar withdrawal from the dangers of a profoundly powerful vision,

the final couplet of Shakespeare's poem recedes into the consolations of poetry and the night: 'All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright daies when dreams do shew thee me.' It is almost best if and that 'dreams do shew thee me' (emphasis mine).

Milton's sonnet, too, is a record of colossal contradictions.<sup>23</sup> None of Milton's mentions of his absence of regular visual facility is either straightforward joy or simple grief. Instead, delight and sorrow are complexly intertwined in his deeply ambivalent narration of his blindness – especially in his awareness that the intensity of his dream vision is enabled by the reality of his blindness. What or whom the poet sees in the dream is so intensely celebrated because she is in the poet's life doubly absent. The poet cannot see her because she is

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this respect alone, against my will, do I deceive' (*A Second Defence of the English People*, trans. Helen North, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 4 pt 1, ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven, 1966), p. 588).

<sup>20</sup> Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets, A New Commentary* (London, 2010) p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Notably, present-day editions of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* prefer the reading, in line 11 of Shakespeare's Sonnet 43, of 'thy imperfect shade' (emphasis mine) in place of 'their imperfect shade' (as the line appears in the 1609 first appearance of the poems). It makes every sense to read 'thy imperfect shade' – which indubitably better follows the sense of the poem. But, however 'their' got there in that line in the 1609 edition, whether by design or by accident, something about the sheer piercing intensity of what I understand to be the beloved's shade's eyes is lost when we depart from the awkwardness and untidy power of 'their imperfect shade' (emphasis mine). See, for instance, the editions by: Stephen Booth (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, CT, 1977)); Colin Burrow (*The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford, 2002)); Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York, 2006)); and Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (*All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2020)).

<sup>22</sup> See Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary writer Andrew Leland – who, like Milton once did, is going blind gradually and slowly and in mature and writerly adulthood – similarly calls his progressive vision-loss 'a powerful engine of ambiguity'. See his *Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight* (New York, 2023), especially p. xx.



departed from life, and the poet cannot see her because he cannot see. (He may never have seen her. Or he may have seen her, but in his blindness felt the loss of her visual presence even when she was around.) An intricate wistfulness thus saturates several levels of consciousness – until the poet gives it expression, leaving accessible the multiple layers of uncertainty and desire. First, his late espoused saint is ‘Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave’ (by whom?) and ‘rescu’d from death by force’ (whose force?) – yet she alone and by her own agency ‘Came vested all in white’ and inclined to embrace her late husband. Second, she came ‘as [one] whom washt from spot of child-bed taint, / Purification in the old Law did save’ (emphasis mine) – her actual purification and post-mortal state of redemption by the ‘old Law’ thus cast into question by the very mention of the once-husband’s dream of such salvation for his wife. Third, ‘[h]er face was vail’d’ yet apparent in it *and* in the rest of ‘her person’ were ‘love, sweetness, goodness’ – all these, ‘[s]o clear, as in no face with more delight’. Within the incoherent coherence of the Miltonic dream, these are not contradictions but certitudes and aspirations that the dreamer must nevertheless awake and depart from. Subsequently, in the post-dream wakefulness of the poet, these ostensible paradoxes are owned and inscribed to extend what is already memory. In Milton’s poem, sight and the beloved exist together, appear and leave together – and what the dreamer awakes to becomes poetry. By the time Milton composes the sonnet, he is dreaming while awake, dreaming of night, and dreaming of both his last light, of the past, and his last and final light, of the future. Looking to the future – the ‘yet once more’ that the poet gestures towards – the sonnet records a trust and hope even while it announces that the vision at the heart of it is almost a premonition. *As he has had in his dream*, the poet asserts, there will come a time when he *will* have full sight in heaven without restraint – as though even the fullest of mortal sight was and remains restrained. As in the dream, so in heaven ultimately, Milton trusts: love, sweetness and goodness will be readily

apparent (even) through the veiled face of a composite figure of affection, notwithstanding the subject’s vision or lack thereof. And just as qualities of goodness will shine through ‘her person’ – *all* her person, without restraint – so too will the apprehension of these qualities belong to a holistic regard and perceptive faculty that draws from, yet operates beyond, a simple visual register. The love, sweetness and goodness are – and will be – *felt* as much as seen. The (post-)human regard will be as close as possible to the timeless divine regard. Sight will operate in a register that transcends the mortal function of the eyes.<sup>24</sup>

Third: there is a peculiar assonance, again, between the endings of Shakespeare’s and Milton’s poems. Shakespeare’s narrator sought almost a visual self-preservation in their final affirmation of the dream-vision, which was also a withdrawal from what might be brilliantly but perilously available in actual vision. Shakespeare’s final lines in Sonnet 43 constitute a genuine couplet, and the poem’s mirrored imagery is sustained to the very end, until and into the ambiguity of the sonnet’s last words. ‘All dayes are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright daies when dreams do shew thee me.’ There is a strange and risky reciprocity hung in the taut balance of those final words. Who is the seer and who is seen? Do the dreams show ‘thee’ to ‘me’, or ‘me’ to ‘thee’? Or do both see both? For what is sight if not the ability to perceive oneself regarded, and to be able to return regard? These questions haunt Milton’s poem. The last two lines’ almost-couplet (for it feels like a couplet but is not one) in Milton’s sonnet XIX/23 is the *dénouement* of a movement throughout the poem from what can be seen to what cannot, a translation of what may be obtainable in vision to what may not. Liminal though she is, Alcestis, pale and faint and brought to Admetus by Hercules, is intensely and eerily

<sup>24</sup> Note also Milton’s Samson’s intense physical desire for sight to be available ‘as feeling [and] through all parts diffus’d’, so that one ‘might look at will through every pore’ (*Samson Agonistes* (London, 1671), p. 14 [lines 97–8]).

visually available.<sup>25</sup> The flushed and visceral sadness of a childbed death is chillingly associable with sight, and, indeed, the image almost overpowers the spiritual idea of purification and salvation that is evoked immediately afterwards.<sup>26</sup> Even with the assertion of salvation, the persisting memory remains that of death, pain and loss.<sup>27</sup> So too is a woman in white, even with her veiled face, entirely amenable to vision. But then we have love, sweetness, goodness and delight. Here, the images end, allowing mnemonic associations to take over. Specialized or ‘fancied’ sight becomes explicitly a matter of multifactorial sense, emanating from and available to a composite sensibility. ‘Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shin’d / So clear, as in no face with more delight.’ This is the climax of the dream, and here language too might have stopped, with the dreamer’s contentment, allowing the dreamer his embrace, the desired culmination of the dream, the togetherness where language is no longer necessary. But such a culmination is not to be, and this moment of greatest positive sensibility is also the moment directly preceding, and therefore cueing the start of, the dreamer’s awakening. Milton records the instant where, alongside the poet’s waking consciousness, language must similarly return to carry the weight of wakefulness and its attendant longing. It is almost all stress at the close of Milton’s sonnet (as it also was in Shakespeare’s sonnet), slowing the poem into awakening and anguish, a dreamer opening his eyes into blindness, which is also poetry: ‘But O, as to embrace me she enclin’d / I wak’d, she fled, and day brought back my night.’<sup>28</sup>

It is this rhythm that Imtiaz Dharker takes up several hundred years later. Dharker’s poem heightens in Miltonic terms the stakes of separation that Shakespeare’s sonnet invokes. ‘In the wake / of you, let day not break’, she writes in the twenty-first century, journeying in sonnet with both Shakespeare and Milton. The author of ‘The Trick’ consciously writes back to and forward from the dreamtime spell of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43. But when ‘Greedy for more / than the gift of seeing you, I lean in to taste / the colour, kiss it off your offered mouth’, her own response to the

Shakespeare sonnet engages with elements not contained in the Shakespeare poem but instead gifted onwards through the synaesthetic unrequitement at the close of the Milton sonnet. What happens after the lover leans in? Do they get to taste the colour – and kiss it off the beloved’s offered mouth? We cannot know. ‘For this, for this, I fall asleep in haste’ – is all that Dharker’s narrator tells us. It may be that here, too, just as the one lover inclined to embrace the other, the dreamer waked, the vision fled, and day brought back the dreamer’s night. For without naming it as such, Dharker’s poem also recalls a desperately and multi-sensorially unmoored bereavement:

Let me keep  
the scent, the weight, the bright of you, take  
the countless hours and count them all night through  
till that time comes when you come to the door  
of dreams.

Like the dreamer in Milton’s poem, the dreamer in Dharker’s poem has little choice, for in the dream is all the vision they can have of their beloved. They are, they disclose, repeatedly ‘willing to fall for the trick that tells the truth’. It is a dual truth that is folded into a final Shakespearian couplet yet bearing a Miltonic message: ‘that even your shade makes darkest absence bright, / that shadows live wherever there is light’. By now, we expect that even the beloved’s shade makes darkest absence bright. But that shadows live wherever there is light is a peculiarly blind and bereaved and

<sup>25</sup> In Euripides’ play *Alcestis*, Hercules rescues Admetus’ wife Alcestis from her grave. The death and resurrection of Alcestis constitute the subject of numerous ancient reliefs and vase paintings.

<sup>26</sup> See, particularly, Louis Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 15–48.

<sup>27</sup> This is a matter of poetic expression precisely because it is a matter of the poet’s unresolved memory and hope – because this is about what is greater than a single man’s memory. Shakespeare and Milton both write in a world of widespread female death owing to reproductive complications, and simultaneously one of widespread infant mortality.

<sup>28</sup> In both Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43 and Milton’s ‘Methought I saw’, as well, the final lines are composed of devastatingly simple, monosyllabic words.

## THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WRITE

Miltonic assertion: it is the blind and visually impaired and blindness-aware that know this truth, and it is the living that have lost someone(s) they love that know this truth. There is nothing about Dharker's poem to explicitly mark its Miltonic route, but four centuries after Shakespeare's sonnets, I suggest, Dharker meditates on Shakespeare through

Milton. We might even say that it is Milton's Shakespeare that she responds to. Shakespeare's poems of time, love, longing and dreams allow Milton his explorations of the disconsolate yet profound power of his visual condition, and teach him anew, through memory and desire, how to use poetry to break, and hold, his dreams.