

Analyzing Two Sonnets by Milton: VII & XIX

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Abstract: *In this paper, I will use the late-written Sonnet XIX and the early Sonnet VII so as to analyze what comes over John Milton's poetic creativity.*

Sonnet VII concerns with time and how it passes hurriedly; Sonnet XIX with Milton's blindness. From the theme of each sonnet, we can realize the seriousness and depth of poetic matter though at the end of each sonnet; Milton becomes more aware of his situation, his God and even the solution.

Indeed, Milton's early poems, particularly those written before 1632 are not impressive, though there are many good lines. Hence, he realizes that he has accomplished little of what he has hoped to do when he writes Sonnet VII.

In my analysis, I will compare between these two sonnets: VII & XIX, and discuss how they reflect the main aspects and poetic differences between Milton's early and late poetry.

Keywords: *Milton, sonnet VII, sonnet XIX*

A paradigm of the expansion and change of poetic matter between the early and the late poems [is] supplied by the Sonnet 19 and the early Sonnet 7... Jon S. Lawry 16-17

John Milton's Sonnet VII entitled "How Soon Hath Time" represents vivacity, youth, light and other aspects that are appropriate to a young man. Sonnet XIX entitled "When I Consider . . ." deals with major problems: blindness, doubt, suffering and struggle—these subjects are for a man of knowledge and age. But to discuss these two sonnets in the light of the above quotation, it is better to explore and explain each sonnet separately and then look at the differences, changes and similarities that take place.

Sonnet VII is most likely written on December 9, 1631. This date is John Milton's twenty-third birthday. And the sonnet refers to his "three and twentieth year!" It is written for a friend who has accused Milton for his love of learning. For a long time he prefers reading and learning. It might be his studies that have cost him his sight later as Ron Macaulay points out (115).

It is a Petrarchan sonnet though the last three lines rhyme d c e instead of c d e. Such a rhyme indicates Milton's worry about time though he appears patient and aware of fate and God's will. This sonnet has iambic pentameter lines. The words are mostly one-syllable ones. This fact gives more musical sound to the sonnet in general. Most words carry their own meanings, such as time, youth, year, manhood, etc. There are words that keep time in mind along the sonnet, such as "three and twentieth year," "late," "so near," "less," "ripeness," etc.

However, personification of "time" at the beginning of Sonnet VII keeps in mind its portrait throughout the entire poem. Milton considers "time" as a youth-thief that has wings. On his wings, he has stolen Milton's "three and twentieth year." Milton does nothing in "the spring" of that year: "But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th." The word "spring" means either a season—this is a relevant meaning to the year—or a fountain-sweet water. A fountain will help plants grow. Here is a question: Does Milton mean a fountain and how does that fit in the context? He may mean something (poetry) that irrigates minds. Thus, he uses "bud or blossom" to refer to poetry as E. A. J. Honigmann argues (98). Otherwise, he refers to the period that has passed with no achievement.

In line three, Milton is sorry that he has no profession or "career." Yet, when he mentions, "bud or blossom," he believes that his career should be poetry and how to water other minds. His production is little though he is getting old. Sometimes one's age cannot be imagined through his countenance. The word "might" in line five suggests a rarity of such a case though it becomes true to Milton who gets his manhood early. Hence, he states, "my semblance might deceive the truth."

Milton shows how his manhood has arrived. It is the ripeness of the mind that affirms manhood. Yet he is complaining that his "inward ripeness" has created less than some others who have done more works at his age. Honigmann argues that those "more timely-happy spirits" are among his contemporaries, such as Randolph (b. 1605), Abraham Cowley (b. 1618) and others who have published some works at that time (96). Thus, in the

octave, Milton appears to be complaining about time, which has stolen his age though others cannot notice. He also complains that he has created fewer works than others have done at his age.

In the sestet, Milton becomes patient, using one-syllable words that assure his belief in fate, whether it is a chance or God's will. Line 12 suggests that time in its course will accomplish what is destined. Both chance and God's will may be used under the Creator's guidance, and Milton hopes he can get the benefit of both to serve his God.

Generally, in Sonnet VII Milton starts talking about time and how it passes, then in the sestet, he becomes aware of fate, and he is patient and wants to serve God. This happens as a result of his "manhood" and "inward ripeness" in the octave.

On the other hand, Milton's Sonnet XIX is concerned with his impediment; i. e. blindness. He becomes totally blind in 1652 and this might be the date of this sonnet. By this time, he has learned a lot. It is probably his learning that causes his blindness. While Sonnet VII has been written to defend his learning and studies, Sonnet XIX is written to complain about his blindness; he is asking his God and makes it clear that it is hard for him to do anything after losing his sight.

Concerning the structure and form, Sonnet XIX is a Petrarchan sonnet. Its rhyme is perfectly Petrarchan abbaabba cde cde and this suggests Milton's awareness and knowledge of his situation. It is written with iambic pentameter lines. Also it has a great affect on the reader for most words are of one syllable. This way of writing shows Milton's ability to use words to convey his message.

In addition, Milton uses, as Karen Lawrence indicates, the language of "monetary exchange": "spent," "account," "exact," "thousands" and "one" (271-73). Also he uses words that suggest time: "when," "spent," "days," "present," "soon," etc. These words provide readers with different meanings and ideas. In addition, words that require attention are used: "light," "death," "ocean," etc.

However, Milton, at the beginning of Sonnet XIX, laments his blindness because, it seems, he does not expect to lose his sight before "half" his "days." At forty-three or a year older, his "sight is spent." The word "spent" suggests giving and taking; he wants to say that this one, i.e. God, who has given is taking now.

After losing his sight, everything is dark. Here, Milton refers to his world as "this dark world." However, the word "consider" at the beginning of Sonnet XIX suggests that he is meditating. Thus, the reader will not be shocked at the conclusion Milton will come to.

Then, Milton recalls the servant who has not obeyed his lord in profiting his "talent." Marjorie Hope Nicolson argues:

The metaphor around which the sonnet is developed is the parable of the talents in Matthew XXV. 14-30, in which the unprofitable servant, who buried in the earth the money his master has given him, was cast out into darkness. (153)

In Sonnet XIX, the word "talent" is a pun. It does not mean money, but it means the knowledge; the "inward ripeness," mentioned in Sonnet VII. Indeed what Milton is insisting on here is that both the servant's money and the "inward ripeness" are given by God.

Milton's talent is his "inward ripeness" that is "death to hide." It is dangerous to hide knowledge from others; knowledge should be given to others. At the same time, he is defending his case and complaining to God. He believes he is useless because he has no power (sight). But his soul argues that he is to serve his Creator. The soul urges him to serve his "Maker and present [his] true account."

To make his argument more concrete and to emphasize his dilemma, Milton poses the following question: "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?" This question adds more to the poem; it states clearly his argument and his defense: "Doth God exact day-labor," is the case and "light denied" is the defense.

After stating the case and defense, Milton apologizes promptly, "I fondly ask." A reader is expecting line 8 to continue the question, yet the conjunction "but" after that changes the direction. This enjambment makes some kind of discord, particularly the one that joins lines 8 & 9: "...But patience to prevent / That murmur..." It is supposed to have an idea in the sestet but here both octave and sestet are mingled through the word "but." Milton discusses the injustice of his trouble in the octave and patience appears to reply his question.

In the following lines, patience is personified. She comes to prevent the foolishness and replies, God doth not used Either man's work or his own gifts;... (Lines 9-14)

The sestet affirms that Milton needs God's help but God is in no need of anybody: "His State / Is Kingly." Under His command everything is done. Under His leadership thousands of angels do what He wants "And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest." Finally, Milton comes to the declaration of faith; he wants to serve God at least by accepting his orders and waiting to be accomplished. Thus both are serving God; the angels and those who "stand and wait."

Coming back to the first point raised at the beginning of this paper, there are some similarities and differences between Milton's two sonnets: VII & XIX. Through these two sonnets, it is clear that Milton is a

man of knowledge. His ideas are explicitly discussed through musical words that add some concord and harmony to the sonnets.

Each sonnet analyzes a problem and discusses it. Time is in Sonnet VII and blindness in Sonnet XIX. In the first, Milton knows that time will accomplish in its course what has been destined, so he becomes patient until "Time leads [him]..." at the end of the sonnet. His patience, in turn, prevails in Sonnet XIX and answers his question. Finally, he is aware that God is in no need of anybody. So he decides to serve God.

On the other hand, Milton is worried about his productivity: "no bud or blossom" in Sonnet VII, and "Lodg'd with me useless" in Sonnet XIX. However, Sonnet XIX represents a dark shadow; Milton complains to God and wrestles with his blindness. Thus, this sonnet represents some kind of strong struggle and suffering. On the contrary, Sonnet VII suggests a youthful poem with a bright shadow (Lawry 16).

Both sonnets depend on a will and response (Lawry 17). In Sonnet VII, Milton wants to produce but time has stolen his youth. In the end, he knows that time is fate and destiny. In Sonnet XIX, there is a question in the middle of the sonnet about whether to serve or not. The response is that God is in no need. Thus Milton becomes aware of accepting His orders and waiting for their accomplishments.

As a conclusion, sonnets no. VII & XIX reflect some changing aspects of Milton's poetry. In Sonnet VII, youth, brightness, activity, to some extent simplicity, optimism, all these sides are presented. As for Sonnet XIX, strong struggle, creativity, seriousness and to some extent pessimism are prevailing. And this change is expected due to the subject matter I addressed while analyzing these two sonnets.

Sonnet VII

How Soon Hath Time

How soon hath time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year!
My hasting daysfly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near,
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n;
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great task-Master's eye.

Sonnet XIX

When I consider . . .

When I consider how my sight 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, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, 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."

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