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Grace through love : an examination of Milton's monism, mortalism, and the Puritan ideals of desire as reflected in Sonnet 23

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Abstract

Grace Through Love: An Examination of Milton's Monism, Mortalism, and the Puritan Ideals of Desire as Reflected in *Sonnet 23*, Leslie Wyatt, Master of Arts, University of Richmond, 2008, Louis Schwartz.

This thesis examines *Sonnet 23*, especially in concern to: 1) Milton's adherence to monism, a philosophical and theological position that he derived from his reading of Rabbinical approaches to the Old Testament; 2) His adherence to the related doctrine of mortalism, which held that death entailed the death, until resurrection of both body and soul; and 3) Milton's interest in the way certain Puritan thinkers idealized desire for aspects of the world's beauty, especially desire for one's spouse, and how, particularly in the process of mourning, such desires could foster a stronger bond with God. The thesis also looks at the tripartite structure of *Sonnet 23*, that is, the series of allusions to Classical, Old Testament, and New Testament texts. The re-examination of the allusions shows that instead of representing despair over bodily limitations, Milton blends monist, mortalist and Puritan beliefs to demonstrate how desire can foster a deeper love between fellow human beings and a deeper love for God.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Professor Louis Schwartz, Thesis Advisor

Professor Alan Loxterman

Professor Tony Russell

Grace Through Love: An Examination of Milton's Monism,
Mortalism, and the Puritan Ideals of Desire as Reflected in *Sonnet 23*

By

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B.A., University of Mary Washington, 2006

A Thesis

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Many scholars have noted the important but ambiguous emphasis Milton places on physical touch and human desire. For example, Turner has observed that Milton's images reflect the multifaceted nature of contemporary political and religious movements.¹ Diane McColley has pointed out how important it was for Milton that physical touch remain within the bounds of obedience to God. She has also demonstrated the ways in which Milton believed sin harmed physical intimacy.² Gardner Campbell has explored how a perfectly tempered sexuality existed in Eden.³ However, such readings have failed to deal fully with the ways in which Milton's images reflect important aspects of his thought. In this thesis I will argue that *Sonnet 23*, in particular, reflects three of these aspects: 1) Milton's adherence to monism, a philosophical and theological position that he derived from his reading of Rabbinical approaches to the Old Testament; 2) His adherence to the related doctrine of mortalism, which held that death entailed the death, until resurrection, of both body and soul; and 3) Milton's interest in the way certain Puritan thinkers idealized desire for aspects of the world's beauty, especially desire for one's spouse, and how—particularly in the process of mourning—such desires could foster a stronger bond with God. The tripartite structure of *Sonnet 23*, based on a linked series of allusions to Classical, Old Testament, and New Testament texts, presents physical desire for the lost body and soul of a deceased spouse, not as something to be rejected, but as itself a powerful tool for obtaining spiritual growth. Instead of

¹ James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

² Diane McColley, "Milton and the Sexes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 147-66.

³ Gardner Campbell, "Paradise Appetite and Cuscan Food in Paradise Lost," in *Arenas of Conflict*, ed. Charles Durham and Kristin McColgan, (London: Associated University Presses, 1997) 239-50.

representing despair over having to live within bodily limitations or a platonic desire to simply transcend those limitations, Milton idiosyncratically blends monist, mortalist and Puritan beliefs to demonstrate how desire itself can foster a deeper love between fellow human beings and a deeper love of God.

The Tripartite Structure of *Sonnet 23*

Critic Leo Spitzer first pointed out the tripartite nature of *Sonnet 23* and offered his interpretation of its structure. Spitzer argued against a close biographical reading and suggested instead that "Milton presents himself as a Christian Platonist who experiences the harrowing realization that, for all his craving for reunion with the Ideal, in this life there exists no intermediary realm between Earth and Heaven."⁴ Spitzer believed each allusion created "a continuous rising movement" that presents us with a series of ever brighter and clearer images, climaxing at line 12.⁵ The idea of increased clarity borrows from the Platonic idea that it is difficult to actual have complete truth. Furthermore, Spitzer saw that the speaker and Admetus were in a similar situation of grieving, and that human imperfection necessitated the "old Law." M.L. Williamson, J.S. Hill and J.C. Ulrich have also developed nuanced arguments that support the idea that the sonnet is a progression from Greek myth, Old Testament law, and complete salvation with the advent of Christ.⁶

⁴ Leo Spitzer, "Understanding Milton" *Essays on English and American Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), 122.

⁵ Spitzer, 125.

⁶ Marilyn L Williamson, "A Reading of Milton's Twenty-Third Sonnet" *Milton Studies* 4 (1972) 141-9. J.C. Ulrich, "Typological Symbolism in Milton's Sonnet XXIII" *Milton Quarterly*. 8. (1974) 7-10. J.S. Hill, "Alcestis from the Grave: Image and Structure in Sonnet XXIII" *Milton Studies*. 10. (1977) 127-140.

Other critics have interpreted the structure differently. Sokol, for example, points out the biographical similarities between Admetus' sacrifice of his wife and Milton's failure to fully protect his first wife, Mary Powell, from dying in childbirth.⁷ Huntley claims that the reader is incapable of ever fully understanding the sonnet because of its biographical nature. He concludes that the allusion must have sprung "from a secret thought in Milton's mind, referred to a private experience of his heart, alluded to a personal association he must have formed with Leviticus 12, all of which he failed to press into public, poetic form".⁸ The closest Huntley comes to an understanding of what connects the three allusions is his suggestion that all three, for some ineffable reason, aid Milton in holding "onto a flickering vision of the spiritual life to come." All three, he points out, are defined by earthly limitations.⁹ On the other hand, Colaccio sees the allusions as connected by human attempts to reach a higher power, but agrees with Huntley that the structure expresses a concern for the afterlife. Colaccio's view of the typology suggests that "there are two planes of spiritual movement," in the sonnet, "each leading to union in God."¹⁰ According to Colaccio, the only way to God is through a "well-defined love of Him." He allows that love of humanity matters, but insists that it must evolve "to God through his [the speaker's] life in history."¹¹ Colaccio's analysis is useful. However, it precludes the idea that physical love can be a means to God, arguing

⁷ B.J. Sokol, "Euripides' Alcestis and the "Saint" of Milton's Reparative Twenty-Third Sonnet" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 33. 1, *The English Renaissance* (Winter, 1993) 131-147. *JSTOR*. University of Richmond. 14 July 2008 <www.jstor.org> 136.

⁸ John Huntley, "Milton's 23rd Sonnet" *ELH* 34.4 (Dec., 1967) 468-481. *JSTOR*. University of Richmond. 14 July 2008. <www.jstor.org> 457.

⁹ Huntley, 481.

¹⁰ John J. Collacio, "A Death Like Sleep: The Christology of Milton's Twenty-Third Sonnet" *Milton Studies* 6 (1974) 181-198, 183.

¹¹ Collacio 183.

that the speaker's desire actually prevents him from attaining "full sight." Fiske also sees the speaker's desires as symptomatic of his fallen state, and believes that the speaker needs to eschew physical love.¹²

On the other hand, McLoone argues that the physical body illustrates "reformed liturgical practices and structures in the visible church".¹³ McLoone attempts to understand the function of the grief that Milton was at pains to explore so fully in the sonnet, and concludes that "the loss and longing, perhaps also the silence of internalized grief and prayer, expressed by darkness are nonetheless aspects of his [the speaker's] dialogue with God and can also confirm his covenantal participation in the mystical body."¹⁴ In the article, McLoone suggests that the "darkness" that the speaker experiences actually reaffirms his relationship with God. While previous critics note the sonnet expresses grief, McLoone's observation is the first to recognize that the grief of the speaker illustrates loss, but also the possibility for spiritual growth.

These studies have together provided us with a rich understanding of the spiritual dimensions of the sonnet's portrayal of a mourning husband. However, the emphasis of the earlier critics on the afterlife and on rejection of earthly limitation, Old Testament ritual, and classical mythology fail to fully account for the structural logic of the sonnet. In what follows I will offer a reorientation of these readings, suggesting that Milton did not actually mean us to reject the Classical and Old Testament portions of his allusive

¹² Dixon Fiske, "The Theme of Purification in Milton's Sonet XXIII" *Milton Studies* 8 (1975): 149-163, 158.

¹³ G.H. McLoone, "Milton's Twenty-Third Sonnet: Love, Death, and the Mystical Body of the Church" *Milton Quarterly* 24.1. (1990), 8-18, 8.

¹⁴ McLoone, 15.

structure. Instead I will suggest his study of Rabbinic teachings led him to see the operation of grace even in such unlikely things as Levitical purification rites and ancient Greek moral customs surrounding hospitality and that the sonnet is designed to force a reader to reconsider the value of such things against the grain of conventional Christian and Platonic thought.

Methought I saw my late espoused saint
 Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
 Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
 Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.

Mine as whom washed from spot of childbed 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 veiled, yet to my fancied sight,
 Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined
 So clear, as in no face with more delight.

But O as to embrace me she inclined
 I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.¹⁵

The sonnet opens with the speaker telling an unnamed interlocutor he has had a dream in which he thought he saw his deceased wife appear to him. The speaker

describes his dream experience by offering three comparisons, each one presented as an allusion. In the first allusion, which covers the first quatrain, the speaker declares that his "late espoused saint" seemed brought to him as Alcestis was brought to Admetus by Heracles in Euripides' treatment of the well-known Greek myth. Next, the second and third allusions come together in a period that stretches from line five, over the octave/sestet break, to the end of line 9. The second allusion compares the speaker's dream wife to his imagined vision of ancient Israelite women who underwent the rites of purification after childbirth that are prescribed in Leviticus 12. The third part claims that she looked as he imagines she will look after he is reunited with her after the resurrection. This third description is based on allusions to passages in the Pauline epistles and Revelation.¹⁶ The speaker tells his interlocutor that the face of his wife was veiled, which alludes to Revelation 7, but the speaker also says that in his dream vision he could see particular attributes of her shining out from her "person" in ways no less delightful than would have been available in a revealed face.¹⁷ This final, and in many ways climactic portion of the poem's description of the spouse's appearance also, as I will later argue, alludes to two other New Testament passages. One of the things that is interesting about the women referred to in the three allusions is that all of them are veiled. Spitzer pointed out that the veil foreshadows "the perfect heavenly bliss that is to come in the eternal future."¹⁸ Despite all three women being veiled, only the speaker's beloved shines.

¹⁵ John Milton, "Sonnet 23." *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*. 2nd Edition. Ed. John Carey. (Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997) 345-8. All of the following quotes are taken from this edition.

¹⁶ Milton alludes to 1 Corinthians 13:12, Hebrews 12-26-7 and Revelation 7:13-14.

¹⁷ Milton alludes to 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁸ Leo Spitzer, "Understanding Milton" *Essays on English and American Literature*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962) 124.

All three of the allusions express God's grace; however, it becomes most fully revealed in the last stage.

After the speaker's description of his wife, she inclines to embrace him. However, right before the two are about to be united, the speaker wakes up from his dream and then his wife's image "flees". Because the speaker builds up the image of his wife to such loveliness, the moment where the two are about to embrace is especially poignant. Upon waking, however, instead of daylight greeting the speaker, he describes waking into a day that brings back the night of his loss.¹⁹ The darkness that the speaker experiences is especially disconcerting, when it is juxtaposed against the light of his wife's shining image.

In the sonnet, a sense of self-sacrificial love permeates all three allusions, and I would like to argue that they do not suggest a mind searching for and finally finding the right story or the theology that best fits its experience. Milton's allusions are not a matter of finding the correct story. They, instead provide us with a gradual clarification of the same story. The distinction is an important one, and it has escaped the attention of Miltonists only because we have only recently gained a clear understanding of Milton's Hebraic influences. Jeffrey Shoulson's analysis in *Milton and the Rabbis*, for example,

¹⁹ Many critics have commented upon the biographical problems concerning blindness and the identity of the spouse. Because this debate does not affect my argument, I will not be discussing it in this thesis. I am concerned, instead, with how Milton's rabbinical studies affect how we read the typology. However, the biographical nature of the poem is a very rich and interesting debate. Some good works to examine on this debate include: Dixon Fiske, "The Theme of Purification in Milton's Sonnet XXIII," *Milton Studies* 8 (1975), 149-63. E. A. J. Honigmann, *Milton's Sonnets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966) 190-4. Anthony Low, "Milton's Last Sonnet," *Milton Quarterly* 9 (1975), 80-1. Louis Schwartz, "'Spot of child-bed taint:' Seventeenth-Century Obstetrics in Milton's 'Sonnet 23' and *Paradise Lost* VIII: 462-78," *Milton Quarterly* 27 (1993), 98-109.

looks at the ways in which Milton borrows from the Hebraic understanding of Genesis.²⁰ Furthermore, Jason Rosenblatt, in his study *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost*, examines the various Hebraic authors that Milton studied, and the Hebraic materials to which Milton would have reasonably had access. Rosenblatt dissects the ways in which Milton portrays natural law, the Mosaic law, and the law as it pertained to Christians in *Paradise Lost*. As other critics before Rosenblatt have observed, John Selden was a dominant force in the development of Milton's Hebraism, and is especially useful in our understanding of how Milton viewed Old Testament law. As Rosenblatt notes, the Reformers of Milton's time viewed the Old Testament law as a monolithic structure that necessitated "using strong negative terms that derive from Paul's interpretation of the Mosaic law."²¹ However, Rosenblatt demonstrates that John Selden provided Milton with an alternative understanding of the law. Selden, for example, believed that all types of law, Adamic, Noachide, and Natural, came from God.²² In *Table Talk*, Selden says that he "cannot fancy to [himself] what the Law of Nature means, but the Law of God," and reasons that there is something that motivates all of humanity to follow certain laws.²³ Furthermore, Selden views the "commandments given by pre-Mosaic revelation" Adamic law, as given to the "whole of the human race."²⁴ Rosenblatt also argues that Selden recognized the Noachide commandments "as a divinely given natural law incumbent on all of humankind."²⁵

²⁰ Jeffrey, Shoulson, *Milton and the Rabbis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

²¹ Jason, Rosenblatt *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994) 38

²² Rosenblatt, 127.

²³ John Selden, *The Table Talk of John Selden*, (London: John Russell Smith: 1856) 84.

²⁴ Rosenblatt, 86.

²⁵ Rosenblatt, 82.

In *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost*, Rosenblatt recognizes Milton's Paulinism, but demonstrates that he also maintained a strong Hebraic ethos that was in some ways opposed to Paul's treatment of the law.²⁶ Rosenblatt, indeed, argues that Milton created a world of "benign law," which allowed him to pay respect to the Old Testament. He points out, for example, that Milton's own scholarship echoed the belief that law and the gospel do not compete, but that both demonstrate God's grace. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton says: "the works of the faithful are the works of the Holy Spirit itself. These never run contrary to the love of God and of our neighbor...which is the sum of the law."²⁷ Because Milton studied Selden, Milton was aware that there was a type of salvation universally available because of the Noachide covenant. Under this covenant, non-Jews were thought to be able to achieve a place in the Jewish heaven, as long as the laws of civilization were followed.²⁸ An understanding of how Milton differed from the Reformers concerning the Old Testament law, allows us to see the similarities between the three allusions in *Sonnet 23*.

Unlike Paul who believed the law existed to demonstrate the failings of humanity, Milton "felt and recorded...the saving power of the Pentateuchal law."²⁹ Rosenblatt demonstrates that Milton viewed the law in this manner, in part, because of his "confidence in...human response and initiative...[and] the identification of his country

²⁶ Rosenblatt, 11.

²⁷ John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*. Ed. Charles Sumner (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901) 6:640.

²⁸ "Jewish law grants all non-Jews who accept these laws of civilization social and theological rights everywhere, as well as residency rights in a Jewish religious polity. As a result, the Talmudic tradition split the gentile world into two sub-categories: immoral persons who reject the Noahide commandments and to whom tolerance is generally not extended, and gentiles who accept the laws of the Noahide covenant who are regarded positively, whom Jews are obligated to protect and sustain." Eugene Korn, *Noachide Covenant: Theology and Jewish Law*. (Boston College 27 June 2008) <<http://www.bc.edu/research> >.

²⁹ Rosenblatt, 64.

with Israel as a holy community."³⁰ Furthermore, Rosenblatt shows that Milton's studies of John Selden helped foster the differences between Paul's interpretations of the law and Milton's. According to Rosenblatt, "to read Selden is to become something of an expert in Jewish learning."³¹ An example of Milton's difference from Paul is illuminated in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. In this tract Milton says human beings are "capable in some measure of controlling their lives..[and] Milton insists that we have only ourselves to blame for our woe, which is remediable not through Christ's redemptive sacrifice but through divine law."³² Milton's studies of Selden, in other words, allowed him to break away from the Pauline understanding of the law, and assert the importance of divine law.

The sonnet is designed to represent earthly limitations, but not as conditions that must simply be rejected. Milton viewed such limitations as trials necessary for spiritual growth. In *De Doctrina* he asserts that "the idea that the spirit of man is separate from his body, so that it may exist somewhere in isolation...is nowhere to be found in scripture, and is plainly at odds with nature and reason."³³ Consequently, what happens to the body affects the spirit. Milton also held the idea that to sin with the body is to sin with the spirit; therefore, he believed in mortalism, that both the body and spirit die until Christ

³⁰ Rosenblatt, 64. Another good example of Milton's differences with Paul include Romans 6. According to Rosenblatt's analysis, " Paul, who could not reconcile the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, instinctively related them by having the old lead up to the new negatively, the law condemning, Christ saving. The Miltonic excerpt describes a law that leads not to sin but to the acceptance of grace." (Rosenblatt 109).

³¹ Rosenblatt, 86.

³² Rosenblatt, 111.

³³ *CPW* 6: 319 as qtd. in Phillip Donnelly, "'Matter" versus Body: The Character of Milton's Monism," *Milton Quarterly* 33.3 (1999), 79-85. *Project Muse*, 80 .

returns.³⁴ Therefore, the speaker's dream of his beloved in heaven can be seen as a form of immediate grace. McLoone pointed out that the speaker's dream creates a "collapse of time," which allows for the speaker to experience hope.³⁵ Indeed, the fantasized "collapse of time" that occurs permits the speaker to remember both God's love in the past as well as his promises about the future of grace.

Furthermore, Milton's monist beliefs better illuminate how Milton treats the Old Testament in general. For example, Milton's monist aesthetic was heavily influenced by a Hebraic understanding of scripture, which helps explain the attention Milton gives to the Old Testament. As mentioned, Milton was heavily influenced by John Selden, who had what Rosenblatt calls a "monist aesthetic."³⁶ Rosenblatt argues that the way Milton treats the body in *Paradise Lost* "constitutes a Hebraic affirmation of the indivisibility of body and soul."³⁷ He elaborates that Milton's prologue is "against the Pauline inference that the Mosaic law, on the basis of which no one could be justified by works, is a law unto death...the treatise agree with the Talmudic insistence that, to the one who performs it, the Torah is *sam hayyim*, a medicine of life."³⁸ Additionally, critics have pointed out that Milton's understanding of monism is distinct from other Christian lines of thought. For example, critic W.B. Hunter has demonstrated that Milton's differs from Thomist monism, because he believed "that all forms, including the human soul are *ex potential material*."³⁹ Rosenblatt argues, Milton "affirms the interdependence of body and spirit...

³⁴ McLoone, 11.

³⁵ McLoone, 11.

³⁶ Rosenblatt, 122.

³⁷ Rosenblatt, 26.

³⁸ Rosenblatt 26.

³⁹ Turner 263-4.

[and] Milton's theological monism [is] explicitly derived from the Hebrew text of Genesis, [and] accords full reverence to the body."⁴⁰

While Milton wanted to explore the idea of suffering as a trial, his depictions of monism reject the idea that the law, and the "Old Testament God" that enforced that law, is bad. Milton's understanding of monism rejects the platonic understanding, granting the Old Testament considerable authority. Milton's beliefs about the body and the soul, avoid privileging the "Old Testament God" over the "New Testament God." Instead, God provides grace through the law and Christ.

Allusion, Law and Grace I: Alcestis

The traditional typological reading of the allusion to the *Alcestis* points out that Heracles and Alcestis represent a Christ figure, while Admetus is the undeserving sinner saved by God's grace. However, this reading is inadequate, failing to consider Milton's approach to the various forms of law. Milton's view of the different types of law suggests that redemption is obtained not only through self-sacrificial love, but also through hospitality customs. For instance, the love that Alcestis displays in giving up her life for her husband is Christ-like. Even Admetus is aware of it as he says in the play *Alcestis*:

⁴⁰ Rosenblatt 25.

"Their [his parents] love for me turned out to be no more than words, not real, whereas you [Alcestis] saved me by giving all your love for my life."⁴¹

Furthermore, love also allows Alcestis to return. The reason Heracles felt moved to save Alcestis was because Admetus "entertained me [Heracles] in your palace as if you were preoccupied by grief which was not of personal concern to you"⁴² By following the hospitality laws, Admetus momentarily placed himself below others and displayed his love for Heracles. These hospitality laws can be read as symbolizing the second greatest commandment, loving one's neighbor.⁴³ Heracles saves Alcestis, because Heracles is moved by Admetus' love for him as expressed through the hospitality rites. The story parallels the Christian story of salvation, because all Christians are saved by God's love as expressed through grace.⁴⁴ Consequently, the myth mirrors the third allusion of salvation through Christ, and suggests that even hospitality rites allow the individual to express love, and in turn, to know God.⁴⁵

When Milton alludes to *Alcestis*, he highlights the pain of loss, but also the redeeming power of love. By doing so, Milton adds an understanding to *Alcestis* that the Greeks were unable to grasp. For example, at the end of the play the Chorus says:

Many are the guises of things divine;

Many things the gods achieve in surprising ways.

⁴¹ Euripides, *Alcestis*. Euripides, Heracles and Other Plays. Ed. Robin Waterfield. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 1.339.41.

⁴² Euripides, 1.113.

⁴³ NIV Mark 12:28-31, Luke 19:18

⁴⁴ Romans 11:6

⁴⁵ IVS 1 John 4:19-21, 1 John 7-12, 1 John 4:12.

Things we expect never come to pass,
 While the god finds ways to make the unexpected happen.
 That was certainly the way this affair turned out. (ll. 1159-63).

According to the Greek Chorus, there seems to be no logic to what happened. Schwartz has observed that Milton must "maintain faith in a God who has allowed death to happen for a reason, but who also promises...all will be restored and bettered."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Schwartz suggests that the myth of *Alcestis* "cannot be said to have any meaning" when compared to the Christian mythos that informs the speaker's perception of his experiences.⁴⁷ Therefore, despite loss, the narrator has greater hope than Admetus ever could have had. However, I would argue that the manner in which Milton alludes to the play of *Alcestis* suggests that the "guises of things divine" is really God's grace at work. Milton purposely alludes to *Alcestis*, not because he wishes to suggest what was lacking or misguided in its vision of the world, but because the play actually demonstrates God working through human love. While Admetus is undeserving, he practices the "sum of the law," that is love for others. Therefore, instead of viewing the myth as simply inferior to the Christian promise, Milton would have understood the *Alcestis* as demonstrating God's grace working through human love.

⁴⁶ Louis Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming, 2009) 260. I am extremely grateful to Professor Schwartz for he sharing the MS with me. The page reference is to his typescript.

⁴⁷ Schwartz, 260.

Allusion, Law and Grace II: Leviticus

If Selden's approach to law suggests we read Greek hospitality customs as conduits of grace, how much more so should we see grace in such things as rites dictated by the Mosaic code itself. The second allusion in the sonnet refers to the Old Testament women and contemplates the relationship of salvation to the Law. In the wake of studies such as Rosenblatt's concerning Milton's relationship to Hebraic influences, we have greater insight into the second allusion.⁴⁸ As we saw earlier, Rosenblatt's scholarship delves deeply into the nature of Milton's Hebraic influences, exploring the vexed Paulinism of *Paradise Lost*. Rosenblatt's argument can also help us to better understand the second allusion of the sonnet. As I noted earlier, the speaker states that his deceased wife looks like the women from the Old Testament who were, "washed from spot of childbed taint" by the purification rites described in Leviticus.⁴⁹ What is interesting here is the fact that the speaker uses the word "save" to characterize the effect of these old rites, suggesting that "purification in the old Law" had some saving power in the Christian sense. Milton places "saves" in the terminal and rhymed position of the line. Most significantly, however, he rhymes "save" with "grave," "gave," and "have." Given the sonnet's references to law and grace, the words "grave" and "gave" remind us that the speaker's losses must be understood in a particular context. "Grave," of course, suggests death, and "gave" suggests restoration. Yet, "have" suggests the future hope that comes through the law and grace, and "have" also links it to the third allusion. Consequently,

⁴⁸ Jason, Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ *Sonnet 23*, ll.6-8.

Milton demonstrates the similarities between the allusions, and the double-sided nature of the law and grace.

Portraying "old" ritual Laws like purification rites in a positive manner might seem uncharacteristic of Milton, who had little use for ceremony.⁵⁰ However, Milton did care about the morality that stood behind such laws, and stated that "law grounded on moral reason, was both [Christ's] office and his essence to maintain."⁵¹ Since Milton believed that Christ upheld the law because it was divinely inspired, it becomes easier to understand why the speaker might indicate that God's mercy operates even within the imperfection of the law.⁵² While a physical rite may seem unrelated to morality, Milton believed that what happened to the body affected the spirit. Consequently, sacramental atonement would represent God's forgiveness working through the law, and the salvation of the Old Testament women would symbolize God's grace and faithfulness in the past.

Milton's description of the law in the sonnet suggests similarities to Paul's analysis of the law in Romans 7, but it also suggests key differences. As discussed above, Milton suggests the saving power of the "old Law." Critics have tended to view the allusion to Leviticus as a way for Milton to allude to his wife's or wives' traumas in childbirth, and Boas, Huntley and Schwartz have commented on the importance of the biographical nature of the poem.⁵³ However, Rosenblatt's analysis of Milton's view on

⁵⁰ Samuel Stollman, "Milton's Dichotomy of "Judaism" and "Hebraism"" *PMLA*. 89.1. (Jan., 1974): 105-112. *JSTOR*. University of Richmond. 10 Nov 2007. <www.jstor.org>.

⁵¹*De Doctrina Christiana*, 2:264.

⁵² Stollman, 107.

⁵³ Schwartz comments extensively on the biographical nature of the poem; however, he notes the following: "I would add, however, that this reticence also allows a reader to follow a critic like Leo Spitzer into the aether of a purely literary and philosophical reading of the poem. In fact, I think it should be clear that the sonnet's "reticence" (its feints, equivocations, and ambiguities—whether deliberate or not), actually makes nonsense out of any attempt to fix its referential "problem." Better to recognize that it is not a problem at

the law and the body helps us understand the limitations of these readings. Rosenblatt points out, as I said, that Milton's monism prevented him from seeing the "old Law" in the same manner as Paul. Whereas Paul saw the spirit as separate from the body, Milton believed that the body and soul sinned together and were redeemed together.⁵⁴

Therefore, Milton's monistic tendencies encouraged an understanding of the relevance of physical Old Testament rites. Paul says: "when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."⁵⁵

Typically, these verses have been interpreted to mean that a focus on the body means that "we bore fruit for death," and were a reason why Christians should eschew the law.⁵⁶ However, Milton refines Paul's analysis by suggesting that the law, with its focus on the body, is congruent with Christ's coming. Milton says: "The works of the faithful are the works of the Holy Spirit itself. These never run contrary to the love of God and of our neighbor... which is the sum of the law."⁵⁷ Milton's interprets the "old Law," with its

all. The only intention we can safely posit for the reticence—and it is a far more productive one than most of the others that have been posited, however narrowly illuminating they have been—is a desire to allow the poem the widest possible range of reference within the literary, theological, philosophical, historical, and biographical realms it *simultaneously* suggests. We can then freely explore the implications of one area of reference or another, and do it for whatever purposes we deem important: personal fantasy, if that is what motivates us, or historical or theoretical arguments (which are different from fantasies, although they might be colored by—or even inspired by—a desire to rationalize one)" (253).

⁵⁴ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 6:138.

⁵⁵ Romans 7:5-6.

⁵⁶ Romans 7:5.

⁵⁷ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 6:640.

attention to the body, as instruction to love God and our fellow humanity; however, Paul seems to believe that the "old Law" is incongruent with the advent of Christ's sacrifice.

The third part of the tripartite structure actually consists of several overlapping textual references. While the speaker uses the word "mine" in line five to assert a distinction between Alcestis and the speaker's wife, he does not use the same distinguishing remark to divide the Old Testament women from the imagined vision of what his wife will look like. Consequently, the speaker hints that the salvation that the Old Testament women will experience is similar to what will happen to his wife. The first part of the third allusion refers to the speaker's hope that he will see his wife in heaven. "Yet once more" is a Pauline allusion that refers to Hebrews 12:26-7 and Haggai 2:6-7. Milton's decision to allude to that particular Pauline allusion reverberates both the New and Old Testament promise of heaven, and emphasizes the similarities of grace. "Full sight" and the references to the face allude to the Corinthians passage which suggests that we will be able to see the truth with Christ's return. The white vestment that the speaker's wife wears suggests Revelations, which is not Pauline. Therefore, all of these allusions reference salvation God promised his believers in the Old and New Testament.

Galatians 5 and *Sonnet 23*: "Above such there is no law"

In the sonnet, the probably blind speaker notes that his wife's face is veiled, but he also tells us: "Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined/ So clear, as in no face with more delight." (ll. 11-2). Years ago, Honigmann noted that the list of adjectives

describing the speaker's wife may be an allusion to Galatians 5:22; however, critics have not explored the ramifications of such an allusion for our understanding of the poem. I believe, however, that Milton did mean his readers to recall the passage from Galatians, and that it is as important to our understanding of the sonnet as the more often cited allusions to 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Revelation. Chapter 5 of Galatians discusses the question of whether or not Christians needed to circumcise themselves, but its conclusion refers to the entirety of the ritual law. In verse 14, Paul quotes Leviticus and says that Jewish law is subsumed in the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. The commandment in Leviticus is an ethical, not a ritual precept, but Paul claims that the ritual is subsumed in the ethical. According to Paul's Platonic perspective, in addition, the flesh is associated with a refusal of the commandment to love, and must be rejected. In the Galatians' passage, Paul lists the fruit of the spirit and discusses the new relationship that Christians have with the law. Paul lists the characteristics that occur when individuals become enslaved by the flesh. In contrast, Paul says that against the fruit of the spirit, " love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance...there is no law."⁵⁸ According to Paul, Christians have no need for the law, and perhaps the body that the law regulates, because of their new relationship with Christ.

Honigmann felt that Milton may have had "in mind a passage like Galatians" because its sentence structure is similar to the one he uses in the poem. The string of nouns used to describe the spouse echoes the string used by Paul to describe the traits of

⁵⁸ Galatians 5:22-3.

those who follow the spirit.⁵⁹ Milton only uses three nouns and there are seven in Paul, but two (and possibly the third as well) are present in both sets. "Love" and "goodness" appear in both the sonnet and in most early English translations of Galatians.

"Sweetness" seems only to appear in the sonnet. However, one of the original Greek words in the Galatians passage may have suggested the English word to Milton.

To explain why this is so, we need to look at another important passage in Paul: II Corinthians 6:6, another place where he gives a list of the attributes of the faithful. Both lists contain the word "chrestotes," which many translations render as "kindness" or such similar words in English in both passages. Some translations, however, including at least one early modern translation, render the word as "sweetness" in the case of Corinthians.⁶⁰ Barclay notes that the Rheims Bible, which was available to Milton, does so, for example in this case.⁶¹ There is good reason, furthermore, to assume that Milton may have thought that this was the right translation for the Galatians passage, as well. Plummer and Brown, for example, in their comment in the Greek of the Galatians passage offer the following definition of "chrestotes:" "the sympathetic kindliness or sweetness of temper which puts others at their ease and shrinks from giving pain."⁶² Barclay suggests that "chrestotes" is used in this context to convey the "spirit in which an act is done" and goes on to claim that the word allows Paul to describe his interpretation

⁵⁹ E.A. Honigman, *Milton's Sonnets*. (St. Martin's Press, New York: 1966) 194.

⁶⁰ Louis J. Martyn, *The Anchor Bible: Galatians*. (Doubleday: New York, 1997) 499.

⁶¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: Galatians and Corinthians*. (New York: Westminster Press, 1975) 56.

⁶² Alfred Plummer and Francis Bacon, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* v.9 (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1915). 196.

of a perfect love, which includes genuine motivations.⁶³ Indeed, the passage in II Corinthians 6 also lists characteristics to describe how a Christian should act in order to build up other believers and honor God. According to the Rheims Bible, Paul claims that acting "in sweetness" is necessary for Christians.

In the Galatians passage, Paul carefully picks adjectives to describe a pure love, and the adjectives that Milton uses in *Sonnet 23* also work to describe a form that represents love. By describing the speaker's wife's "person" as shining with "love, sweetness, and goodness," Milton offers up the characteristics that he feels create love in its highest form. By choosing to use the word "sweetness," in other words, Milton may have been out to suggest both of the passages, as well as a particular way of reading them. The choice of the English "sweetness" adds a more sensual and physical quality to his description. Therefore, the love of the wife possesses not only the qualities associated with the Christian interpretation of the word love, but also erotic qualities. Milton's choice to emphasize the physical relationship that the speaker had with his wife suggests that Milton thought the body could be used as a site to express both human and godly love. When the body was no longer present, God used this physical absence to increase the individual's longing for his beloved and his God. Furthermore, a focus on the physical relationship of the speaker and his wife, even as the narrator mourns, is also significant. Highlighting the physical relationship as the speaker mourns, suggests that the body may play a key role in both life and death. Milton demonstrates that the

⁶³ Barclay, 56.

imperfection of physical love assists in higher spiritual attainment and is important for its own sake.

Light in the Darkness

Up until this point in the sonnet, the speaker has been describing the vision of his "saint;" however, this last section marks the mourning of the speaker. The last two lines of the sonnet are structured like a couplet syntactically, although not in terms of rhyme. The turn "But O" marks the beginning of this section and places special emphasis on the speaker's grief, conveying the longing of the speaker for reunion with his beloved and his sorrow at the interruption of what we are suddenly reminded was a "fancy." He awakens just as his dreamed wife leaned-in to embrace him. Instead of reunification, the poem ends with the speaker's wife fleeing from him and the speaker awakening back to darkness.

Critics have puzzled over why Milton, as a Christian writer, would end his sonnet with such despair. However, Milton's images closely follow some common Puritan understandings of how to cope with the loss of a beloved. For example, many Puritan divines believed that "marriage was the opportunity for spiritual effort," a covenant that allowed for faith to grow.⁶⁴ Milton demonstrates that the death of a spouse allows the widower to contemplate the ways of God more closely and gain greater intimacy with Him. Mourning is, in other words, a species of spiritual effort, an important one that

⁶⁴ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*. (Columbia University Press: New York, 1957) 120.

critics have connected to spiritual love.⁶⁵ The Puritans connected the bereavement that a spouse feels after his/her beloved dies to the sense of longing for heaven that all Christians feel.⁶⁶ Additionally, longing for a dead wife or husband is closely connected to a desire for union with God, and by losing a spouse, the widow/widower practices the emotions of longing and desire that ultimately lead to God. The Puritan's emphasis on desire also illustrates how Milton's motif of physical touch portrays God as love. Lane pointed out that many Puritans during this time period viewed marriage covenants as a reaffirmation of their covenant with God. Indeed, some felt that the spouse was a physical manifestation of God's love, and was "sanctified by the spirit."⁶⁷ Milton shows that God uses physical love as a building block for a heavenly love.

Lane's study of seventeenth-century poetry shows that such poetry exhibits a "richly porous language in which longings for nature, spouse, and God are constantly played against each other" echoing the human condition.⁶⁸ The poetry over and over again asserts that realizations concerning the inadequacies of the physical relationship one has with one's spouse can help one realize the limitations of earthly existence itself. However, the earthly physical existence not only makes the human separation from God known, it also provides the means to create a closer relationship with God. In Milton's sonnet the speaker experiences God's love through his past physical relationship with his wife. He, in other words, has experienced God's love in a physical form. The lack of the

⁶⁵ Belden Lane, *Nature and Marriage in Puritanism*. *Church History*. 69.2 (June, 2000): 372-402, 390. Lane studied seventeenth century poetry and noticed a consistent theme of desire for one's deceased spouse as crucial for higher spiritual attainment.

⁶⁶ Lane, 390.

⁶⁷ Haller, 120.

⁶⁸ Lane, 393.

speaker's wife's physical presence is a loss, but ultimately the memory of physical touch continues to feed the speaker's desire for his wife. By placing the speaker back into darkness, Milton shows that pain and longing are necessary for growth. The speaker suffers in a way tied to his relationship, as his beloved manifested God's love to him in a physical way. The speaker's wife's fear or disdain is there because Milton indicates the way the speaker imagines her in a heavenly and "pure" state. Milton suggests that there will not be a difference between how they relate on earth and in heaven. The speaker must return to the darkness, because a contemplation of his relationship with his wife is the correct way for him to return to God. The speaker's love for his wife does not represent a simple love for another human being that must be rejected in favor of direct love of the divine. Milton suggests that the memory of earthly physical love reminds the speaker of God's mercy and is a conduit for grace. Because the speaker experienced God's love through his wife, the withdrawal of his wife's presence may seem like God has deserted him. However, through the wife's absence, the memory of physical touch increases the speaker's desire. Milton's word choice, again, focuses on physical desire, only in the last two lines of the sonnet. The speaker describes his beloved reaching down to "embrace" him, with a focus on physical touch. Interestingly, "embrace" is an internal rhyme with "face," which may be an allusion to the Corinthians passage. In Corinthians, Paul says that we will see "face to face," suggesting that we will see the truth. In other words, in heaven, the "veil" will be lifted and the speaker and his wife will be united. Milton's allusion demonstrates that the physical body will continue to have importance in heaven and is a part of seeing clearly. The reference to Corinthians

suggests that the physical body will be seen even in heaven as a means of God's love and grace. Milton's focus on the "person" and "embrace" could be another way for Milton to reinterpret Paul, and assert the importance of the physical body.

The desire for touch on the speaker's part and his loss of that touch—his inability to maintain the fantasy up to and including the point of touch—is really a hidden grace in the poem and the experience. The speaker can only gain grace if he experiences a physical longing because grace was most potently present to him as a married man in the physical love of his spouse. Intimate touch was during the marriage a vehicle for divine love, so the speaker can only approach God through the memory of that in his state of loss. The physical nature of the speaker's relationship is emphasized by the focus on the person of the wife and the crisis entailed by the memory of embrace. However, the focus on the memory of a physical relationship should not be understood as a platonic rejection of the transience of earthly things, leading to *contemptus mundi* and contemplation of things beyond the world. Rather, Milton suggests that earthly love, in life and even its mere memory, allows the speaker to work through his understanding of salvation.

As the speaker grows spiritually because of his past experiences with touch, Milton shows God using imperfect physical touch. For example, the speaker's memory of physical touch with his wife is so powerful that it spurs a continuing desire. Furthermore, the mere hope of future touch in the speaker's dream provides solace. Consequently, because the speaker was redeemed by love in his life, he has the faith for future redemption. By portraying a God working through human touch, Milton shows a God whose grace surpasses all confinement.

An examination of the depiction of Adam and Eve's relationship in *Paradise Lost* may also represent a blending of monism, mortalism and Puritan beliefs. A study of these ideas in *Paradise Lost* would not only strengthen the arguments that I have made in *Sonnet 23*, but also clear up some ambiguities about Adam and Eve's relationship that have previously puzzled critics. Numerous critics have commented on the complicated role of touch in the epic, specifically before and after the Fall. Under the framework of Milton's monists, mortalists, and Puritan beliefs, a distinct set of values emerges from the images of Adam and Eve's physical relationship. As this thesis argues, *Sonnet 23* reflects Milton's beliefs in monism, mortalism, and his attention to certain Puritan thinkers' understanding that desire for one's spouse could be a means to create a stronger bond with God. Furthermore, a re-examination of the tripartite structure of *Sonnet 23*, shows that Milton's study of Rabbinic teachings led him to see the operation of grace even in Levitical purification rites and ancient Greek moral customs surrounding hospitality. Milton harmonizes monist, mortalist, and Puritan beliefs to show that physical love and desire, with all of its imperfections, nurture spiritual growth. Instead of despairing in the bodily limitations, Milton demonstrates the ways in which the physical body can be used as an instrument to find light in the darkness.

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Biography

Leslie Wyatt received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Mary Washington in 2006. While at Mary Washington, she was inducted into Sigma Tau Delta, the National English Honor Society. She began her graduate studies at the University of Richmond immediately after her graduation from University of Mary Washington. At the University of Richmond, she had the opportunity to take Professor Schwartz's seminar on John Milton. Not only was Professor Schwartz's guidance instrumental in providing a strong foundation of John Milton's work, but the class instilled her with a deep appreciation for Milton's work. Leslie is extremely appreciative for Professor Schwartz's guidance throughout the course and while writing her thesis. She currently teaches eighth grade English in Mecklenburg County.

