Classical allusion in a Sonnet of Milton

On his Deceas'd Wife

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,
Rescu'd from Death by Force though pale and faint.
Mine as whom wash'd 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 Heav'n without restraint,
Came vested all in white, pure as her Mind:
Her Face was veil'd, 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 inclin'd
I wak'd, she fled, and Day brought back my Night.

Milton's last sonnet, "On his Deceas'd Wife", is justly famous. Scholarly dispute over which wife's death is being commemorated, Mary Powell's (1652) or Katharine Woodcock's (1658), cannot be entirely resolved, but it seems more fitting for a husband who had never seen his wife's face to know her, *despite* her wearing a veil. His hope of seeing her in heaven "without restraint" further suggests he is thinking of the woman he married after becoming totally blind, Katharine Woodcock.

More difficult to gauge is the mood of the sonnet. Is this a happy poem or a sad one? On a first reading it appears to contain both grief and joy. There seems little doubt that the poem has a strong Christian vision which argues for optimism: the poet's wife, now a "Saint", appears to him all in white, reflecting her purity of mind and body, not just through the physical purification of the "old Law" of Moses but through having her spirit cleansed by Christ. Milton senses, rather than sees, love emanating from her face, and he is confident of being reunited with her finally in heaven, and enjoying the "full sight" of her denied him on earth. The allusion to Alcestis, the wife in Euripides' play rescued from death by Hercules and restored to her husband Admetus, conjures up the paradox of this particular drama, that tragedy, however harrowing, can end with tears of joy.

But as Milton would have known, there is no real parallel here: *his* wife is not restored to *him*, except to his "fancied sight" in a dream – cold comfort indeed. The physical rapture of Euripides' Admetus in holding his lost wife once more is conspicuously denied to Milton as day brings back his night. Further doubts arise when we consider the other, less explicit, influence on the poem – Book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid.* It casts a far darker shadow than Euripides' tragedy. Milton has conflated

two passages from Virgil's account of the sack of Troy. The first is Aeneas' vision of his goddess mother, Venus, in all her divine radiance, illuminating the darkness of that terrible last night:

> "Thus while I rave, a gleam of pleasing Light
> Spread o'er the Place, and shining Heav'nly bright,
> My Mother stood reveal'd before my Sight.
> Never so radiant did her Eyes appear;
> Not her own Star confess'd a light so clear.
> Great in her charms, as when on Gods above
> She looks, and breaths her self into their Love."
>
> (*Aeneid* 2. 588-92, trans. Dryden, 1697)

Venus' purpose is to prevent her frenzied son from killing Helen, the apparent cause of all Troy's woes. Significantly, she achieves this end by enabling Aeneas to see what no other mortal at Troy can, that the gods themselves, not the Greeks, are the real agents of the city's destruction. The question of sight, so central to Milton's sonnet, reminds us that the poet's vision of a state of bliss is in the future, not, as in Virgil, the gift of a god removing the scales from his eyes, and that what is clearly built around an allusion may also be for Milton an illusion: "*Methought* I saw…" How real is this experience? He *trusts* to have full sight of his wife eventually, but does this imply certainty or hope? If the latter, Milton with his deep knowledge of tragedy, his favourite classical reading, would know the sober warning of Ajax in Sophocles' play: "No merit has he in my eyes, the man who warms himself with empty hopes."

The second Virgilian allusion is closer still to Milton's imagined experience. Aeneas, frantically searching Troy for his lost wife, Creusa, is suddenly confronted by her ghost, the first indication to him that she is dead (*Aeneid* 2.771ff.). She offers the cold comfort that he has a higher destiny to pursue, in which she cannot share, that she will be spared the degradation of captivity in Greece, and that she has been chosen to serve "the great mother of the gods" as a favoured acolyte. Like Milton's wife, she has passed on to a higher spiritual plane. Her final word to Aeneas is "love" ("amorem") but it is not *their* love she means, but the love they share for their son, who now has no mother. Aeneas would be haunted for the rest of his life by the last word she had spoken to him while alive: "relinquor" ("I am being abandoned"). Virgil then underlines the pathos of their parting (again in the Dryden):

> I strove to speak, but Horror ty'd my tongue
> And thrice about her Neck my Arms I flung;
> And thrice deceiv'd, on vain embraces hung.
> Light as an empty Dream at break of Day,
> Or as a blast of wind, she rush'd away.
>
> (*Aeneid* 2. 791-94)

Creusa leaves him "in tears, wanting to say much" ("lacrimantem et multa volentem dicere", lines 790-91), having earlier told him to banish his tears for the Creusa he had loved ("dilectae", line 784, is surely the most eloquent past participle Virgil ever

wrote: she is a ghost, she tells him, and his love for her now belongs *in the past*). In Milton's poem the dead wife does not speak but *shows* her love, or rather is about to, when there is a sudden reversal of the rising mood of happiness, as the blind man wakes and any further contact is denied in a haunting line that evokes the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice; "I wak'd, she fled, and Day brought back my Night."

Despite the Christian vision that informs the sonnet, this is hardly a happy ending, with its frustration of the loving couple's approaching reunion, and the image of the poet plunged back into solitary darkness as the world around him wakes up to the light of day. His only, fault, if fault it be, was to wake, and here he can be no more blamed than the Orpheus of the Fourth Georgic, betrayed by his heart on the verge of blissful reunion with his dead wife. What is remarkable here is the vividness with which Milton expresses this lost without a trace of self-pity, showing true classical restraint.

So the poem that begins with Death apparently relaxing his grip ends with the stern gaoler reasserting his authority. Hercules in Euripides' *Alcestis*, as the myth prescribed, gains only a temporary reprieve for a virtuous lady, and this greatest of heroes was himself to die an agonising death after a life of service to his fellow men. In this respect he is the closest parallel that the ancient world provides to Christ: the son of God with mortal parents, who sought to do good in the world and knew (unlike any Olympian god) what it was to live and suffer as a mortal, though finding immortality at last.

It may be that Milton intends us to think of Christ as the raiser of Lazarus and conqueror of death when he calls Hercules "Jove's great Son", but there are problems with such an interpretation: throughout his active life the Greek hero never succeeded in resisting the pleasures of the flesh – he was, after all, a product of his age – and indeed appears roaring drunk and abusive in Euripides' play before he sobers up for his wrestling match with Death. His own death is no chosen act of self-sacrifice, but a tragic accident caused by his long-suffering wife who thought (with justification) that he had left her for another woman. Milton would have known the plot of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, as well as the later canonisation of Heracles by Stoic philosophers as a paragon of virtue, but the ground he chose for his sonnet was Euripides' play, not some late Greek or Roman piece of moralising.

We do not, in any case, need to subscribe to such an interpretation in order to see that Milton achieved here a balance between Christian optimism and classical pathos. There may be less than total harmony between the claims of heaven and the grave, but this honesty, and not just the formal beauty of its expression, is what makes the sonnet so impressive. It enables Milton to make sense of an extraordinary experience and gives us one of the finest poems in the English language.

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