

Milton's Sonnet 9: A Contextual Explication

Milton's Sonnet 9 is one of praise for the virtuous conduct thus far exhibited by a particular woman and of assurance that she will have already earned heavenly seat upon her death. The visible form of the poem is that of a traditional fourteen-line Petrarchan sonnet containing two quatrains followed by two tercets. The beginning octave offers praise for the woman's conduct while the ending sestet gives assurance of her future reward. William McCarthy points out, "Milton's strategy is to start with the historical person and then transform the person into an image of the virtue for which the sonnet praises [him or] her."¹ The rhyme scheme is abbaabbacdecde. Metrically, the sonnet is written in pentameter throughout, five beats per line. Few lines adhere to strict iambic footage, yet each ends in ascending rhythm as if to prefigure the woman's eventual ascent . . .

The addressee is a woman referred to as "Lady" (1). Though many would deem her to be quite young—"in the prime of earliest youth" (1)—the word "that" (1) immediately preceding the phrase poses some ambiguity. "Hast shunned" (2) shows that the woman did so in the past and, therefore, it can be concluded that the prime of her youth also has passed. Regardless of age, she is diligently devoted—she "zealously attends" (9); she is on a road of moral high ground—"thy growing virtues" (7); and she is "wise and pure" (14).

In describing the relationship between speaker and audience, it is apparent that the former has observed the lady and has judged her as a "virgin wise and pure" (14) . . .

The sonnet is written in the present tense. "Growing" (7), "is fixed" (9), and "attends" (9) indicate so. Prior to the poem's opening, the lady had "shunned the broad way" (2). This is a

¹ (McCarthy 101)

biblical allusion. “The way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it” (Matthew 7:13).² This is another way the poem fits into a religious context. The lady has avoided moral destruction by having prudently kept away from the broad way. She is not among the many, but rather “with those few [who] are eminently seen” (3). She had also shunned “the green” (2) before the poem began. According to . . .

The “odorous lamp” (10) is symbolic of a record, register, or scorecard of Merit Theology. The lady is filling hers “with deeds of light” (10) as her oil. The “bridegroom” (12) is used metaphorically to represent Jesus. All of these, along with “virgin wise” (14), are allusions to the biblical Parable of the Ten Virgins found in Matthew 25:1-13³ that likens the wise to virgins who greet their bridegrooms with lamps full of oil and are rewarded with entrance into the blessings of marriage. In the Old Testament, the union of God with His faithful people is often allegorized to the state of matrimony. For example, in Isaiah 61:10⁴ the image of a bridegroom is used as a metaphor for God—“And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, / So your God will rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:5).⁵ From this allegorical perspective, “his feastful friends” (12) would refer to a heavenly host of angels.

“That labor up the hill of heav’nly truth” (4) portrays the image of the lady’s virtuous attainment. The use of this pastoral also lends the sonnet to a religious context. “This would be the equivalent of Dante’s Mount of Purgatory . . .

² (Open Bible 969)

³ (Open Bible 989)

⁴ (Open Bible 709)

⁵ (Open Bible 709)

The rhetorical goal of Sonnet 9 is one of admonition for young women. Those who wish to be accepted by God and to reap heavenly reward need keep themselves virginal and pure when not in the state of matrimony and continuously attend to works of honor. Relating the poem's speaker to Milton, McCarthy summed this up simply in his article . . .

Works Cited

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