

Milton's Identification with the Unworthy Servant in Sonnet 19: A Response to Margaret Thickstun*

DAVID V. URBAN

In her fine essay "Resisting Patience in Milton's Sonnet 19," Margaret Thickstun seeks to analyze Milton's sonnet through a close textual analysis of Milton's rhetorical strategy, also specifically considering the poem's context "as part of a small group of early modern English lyrics that address frustrations about the speaker's poetic calling and close with a voice other than the speaker's" (168). As one of Thickstun's interlocutors in this essay, I would like to respond to an interpretive point in which Thickstun specifically demurs to my reading of Milton's sonnet. Against my assertion that the sonnet's autobiographical speaker genuinely identifies with the unprofitable servant of the parable of the talents, Thickstun denies "that Milton's speaker truly identifies with the unworthy servant" (173). She compares Milton's speaker to the speaker in George Herbert's "The Collar," stating that, like the speaker in Herbert's poem, "this speaker protests the lack of return for his service. He is not so much anxious about being found unworthy, or mistaken in trying to tally his 'account' prematurely, as he is aggrieved at being unfairly overlooked" (173). To support her position, Thickstun postulates that the speaker seeks "recognition and validation—by *pretending* that he has been cast into the role of unworthy servant" (173; italics Thickstun's); she notes (following Stephen Fallon and Dayton Haskin) that Milton avoids spiritual vulnerability in his writings (173-74); and she cites Haskin's

*Reference: Margaret Thickstun, "Resisting Patience in Milton's Sonnet 19," *Milton Quarterly* 44 (2010): 168-80.

For debates inspired by Thickstun's article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deburban0222.htm>>.

observation regarding the oddness of the multi-talented Milton identifying himself with the unworthy servant who received but a single talent (174).

But Thickstun's dismissal of Milton's genuine identification with the parable's unworthy servant has several shortcomings. Firstly, by the time Milton wrote Sonnet 19 (ca. 1652), he had already identified with the unworthy servant—and strove mightily to distance himself from such self-identification—on several occasions. As commentators on this sonnet routinely observe (cf. Lieb 50-51; Haskin 30, 33, 36-37, 171-72; Barton 112-13; Urban 1-8, 10-11; Gregory 25-26), Milton wrestled with this self-identification in two earlier, explicitly autobiographical writings: his "Letter to a Friend" (ca. 1632) and his anxious digression during the preface of book 2 of *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642). I have also discussed his self-conscious identification with the unworthy servant within the explicitly autobiographical *Ad Patrem* (ca. 1634; see Urban 8-10). Before Thickstun denies the speaker's identification with the unworthy servant in Sonnet 19, she ought first address the established pattern of Milton's uncomfortable identification with that servant in these earlier autobiographical writings, but she neglects any such discussion.

Secondly, Thickstun simultaneously commits both an either-or fallacy and a deductive fallacy when she argues that Milton's oft-noted proclivity for self-validation and his comparative lack of spiritual vulnerability preclude his genuine identification with the unworthy servant. A more incisive reading of Milton's relation to the unworthy servant in light of his personal complexities is offered by Tobias Gregory. In a recent article, Gregory addresses, like Thickstun, both Milton's frequent "impulse to turn disadvantage to advantage" and his failure to "acknowledge a personal sense of sin" within the sonnet (26). Nonetheless, Gregory also properly points out that in the sonnet, Milton (as Gregory calls the speaker) fears "the unprofitable servant's reward of eternal damnation" (28-29). Here, Gregory recognizes that in Sonnet 19 Milton continues his anxiety-ridden identification with the unworthy servant.

Finally, Thickstun commits another either-or/deductive fallacy by suggesting that Milton's tremendous giftedness precludes self-identification with the unworthy servant. We should emphasize that what is at issue in the sonnet is not the number of the speaker's talents, but his failure to use a specific talent with which he has been entrusted. (We should also note that when the speaker tells of "that one Talent which is death to hide," he employs the parable's imagery of the "one Talent" without actually saying that he has merely one talent. Certainly Milton could consider himself an unfaithful servant who neglected a particularly significant God-given talent regardless of how many "talents" he himself actually had.) As Haskin observes, "many" (103) seventeenth-century British Bible readers identified strongly with the unworthy servant and the parable's threat (103-04), and the "fear of the master voiced in the third figure in the parable had a distinctive resonance in a culture that accorded prominence to doctrines about reprobation and insisted that the elect were required to make their 'calling and election sure'" (34). And certainly fearful readings of the parable were by no means limited to less gifted individuals, as Haskin's examples of John Donne and John Bunyan exemplify (29-34). Moreover, although Haskin sees the sonnet's speaker as a "representative figure" (101), he in no way denies Milton's own identification with the unworthy servant, and Haskin even postulates that Milton may have "regularly heard in the talents parable a burdensome threat" (102).

Calvin College
Grand Rapids, USA

WORKS CITED

- Barton, Carol. "They Also Perform the Duties of a Servant Who Only Remain Erect on Their Feet in a Specified Place in Readiness to Receive Orders': The Dynamics of Stasis in Sonnet XIX ('When I Consider How My Light Is Spent')." *Milton Quarterly* 32 (1998): 109-22.

- Fallon, Stephen M. *Milton. Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Gregory, Tobias. "Murmur and Reply: Rereading Milton's Sonnet 19." *Milton Studies* 51 (2010): 21-43.
- Haskin, Dayton. *Milton's Burden of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994.
- Lieb, Michael. "Talents." *A Milton Encyclopedia*. 9 vols. Gen. ed. William B. Hunter. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1980. 8: 48-51.
- Urban, David V. "The Talented Mr. Milton: A Parabolic Laborer and His Identity." *Milton Studies* 43 (2004): 1-18.