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When I use a word . . . Counterfactual medical history: Milton's poetry

If Milton's blindness had been successfully prevented or treated, would he still have produced the poetry that he did after 1652? The three sonnets that deal specifically with his blindness would not have appeared. Nor would some passages in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. There is no reason to suppose that he would not have written *Paradise Lost*, since he had planned some such epic for many years. And although, because of its subject matter, he might not have been inspired to write *Samson Agonistes*, he might well have found an alternative subject of equal interest. However, on the restoration to the throne of Charles II in 1660 an act was passed, The Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity and Oblivion, in which the names were published of those who were not pardoned for their part in the English civil war, and who were therefore condemned to death. It is thought that one reason that Milton was pardoned was that his blindness had been punishment enough. Had he not been blind, political expediency might have deprived us of his last three great poems.

Jeffrey K Aronson

Milton's blindness

I have previously discussed two of the three questions that I posed at this year's Chalfont St Giles and Jordans Literary Festival. First, what caused Milton's blindness?¹ My best guess is that he had glaucoma, perhaps accompanied by comorbidities, to explain some of the features that do not fit a single diagnosis. This is, of course, unsatisfactory, but I fear that no definitive diagnosis will ever be possible.

Secondly, could Milton's visual impairment have been prevented, or at least mitigated, had modern techniques been available?² The answer is that it almost certainly could, whatever the diagnosis. Equally interesting is the question of the treatments, surgical and medical, to which Milton was actually subjected or subjected himself. We know that he had setons inserted, but not what medicines he took. Nicholas Culpeper's 1653 edition of the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, which quotes several previous authorities, offers possibilities, of which juniper berries stand out as a remedy that Milton might have used for both gout and blindness, from both of which he suffered. But again the highly speculative nature of this suggestion must be recognised.

Milton's poetry

My third question was whether Milton's poetry would have been in any way different if his visual impairment had been prevented or mitigated.

Milton's literary output divides conveniently into four parts.

1. What might be called juvenilia, written between 1624 and 1630.
2. Early poems, written between 1630 and 1642.
3. Works, both poems and pamphlets, written during the English civil war, between 1642 and 1651, during most of which time he was gradually losing his sight.
4. Late poems, written between 1652, when he had become completely blind, and his death in 1674.

Between 1624 and 1630 Milton wrote nearly 40 unpublished poems, many of them in Latin. These included *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, regarded as his first major work, *On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough*, and seven sonnets, five of them in Italian. These were later published in 1645, along with his other early poems, in the first anthology of his verse. Milton's sonnets are neither Spenserian nor Shakespearean, but have a rhyme scheme all their own. The octaves are Petrarchan, consisting of two quatrains rhyming abba, abba. The sestet has different rhyming schemes: about half, like Petrarchan sonnets, rhyme cde, cde or cd, cd, cd, but the others have various different rhyme schemes. Milton also often ignores the volta and enjambes between lines 8 and 9.

In 1630 Milton contributed a dedication to Shakespeare as part of the introductory matter to the 1632 Second Folio edition of his plays. It was Milton's first published poem, albeit uncredited, *An Epitaph on the Admirable Dramaticke Poet, W. Shakespeare*, 16 lines in rhyming couplets. Over the next 12 years Milton wrote about 20 poems, including some of his most famous, *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*. He also wrote the mask *Comus*, which was performed at Ludlow Castle in 1634, with songs set to music by Henry Lawes.

Milton didn't stop writing poetry during the civil war, but spent a great deal of his time turning out pamphlets, first against the bishops and later against the king. During this time he wrote about 20 poems, mostly sonnets and verse paraphrases of some of the Psalms of David.

Having become increasingly affected by visual impairment during the war, Milton began the final period of his life with the sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent," although the exact date of its composition is not known. In around 1657 he started work on *Paradise Lost*, which he completed in 1665. The first edition was published in 1667 in 10 books and the second edition in 1674, revised into 12 books. *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* followed in 1671, published in a single volume.

I have taken two approaches to the question of whether and to what extent Milton's blindness may have affected his poetry: analysing the vocabulary that he used and how often he referred to his blindness.

Milton's vocabulary

First I analysed the terms related to visual imagery that Milton used in his early and late poems. I looked for words such as eye/s, vision, visible/visibly, sight, see/ing, saw, light, and dark/ness and words for colours, such as red, green, blue, yellow, purple, silver, and gold/en. I expressed the number of instances as a proportion of the number of lines of verse he wrote and found that he used significantly fewer of these types of words in his later verse than in his earlier.

One might conclude from this that Milton's blindness led him to use fewer words related to visual imagery in his later verse. However, control analyses were needed.

I therefore next looked for words related to olfactory imagery, such as smell, scent, odour, aroma, nose, savour/y, stench, and perfume, and words for flowers, such as lily, violet, rose, laurel, myrtle, pansy, and asphodel, recognising that flowers might conjure up visual as well as olfactory sensations. The same pattern appeared—fewer instances in the later verse.

Finally, I looked for words related to auditory imagery, such as hear/ing, ear, list/en, hark, audience/audible, and sing/ing, and names of birds, such as lark, nightingale, dove, hen, chicken, and cock. Again, the same pattern appeared—fewer instances in the later verse.

I then approached the question from a different linguistic angle, looking for innovativeness in Milton's use of language. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* gives instances of the uses of words and phrases that it defines, and in each case the earliest instance quoted is thought to be the earliest written instance of the use of the word. Sometimes earlier instances can be found, but my experience of searching for antedatings of medical words suggests that they can be found in only about 10% of cases.

My overall analysis of Milton's linguistic innovativeness is too extensive to describe in detail here. However, of 525 words with whose first written use he is credited in the *OED*, he used 212 before the onset of his visual impairment, 170 during the time when his sight was deteriorating, and 143 after he became completely blind. Thus, Milton's innovative use of words also appears to have waned as time went by.

All of these results suggest that either ageing or perhaps the subject matter with which he was dealing, religious in the later works compared with the more secular early ones, may have influenced Milton's use of vocabulary, rather than encroaching visual impairment.

Milton's subject matter

Nevertheless, Milton often referred to his blindness in the poetry that he wrote from 1652 onwards, even if he appears to have used vocabulary less replete with visual imagery during that time.

For example, three of his sonnets explicitly refer to his blindness: Sonnet XVI (as numbered in the 1673 edition of his verse, *Poems, &c. upon Several Occasions*, but later numbered XIX), "When I consider how my light is spent"; Sonnet XXII, "Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear"; and Sonnet XIX (or XXIII), describing his dead wife, "Methought I saw my late espoused saint," in which he describes seeing, in a dream, his second wife, Katherine

Woodcock, whom he had never seen in life, and imagines seeing her after death.

Paradise Lost contains two passages that specifically refer to Milton's blindness. Book III begins with a hymn to light, immediately followed by a long autobiographical reflection. "Thou," he writes, addressing God:

"Revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn; So thick a Drop Serene hath quenched their Orbs, Or dim suffusion veil'd."

Later in *Paradise Lost*, in Book VII, Milton refers to his "darkness":

"More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchang'd To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil dayes, On evil dayes though fall'n, and evil tongues; In darkness, and with dangers compass round, And Solitude; yet not alone, while thou Visit'st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn Purples the East."

This passage is ambiguous. It could refer specifically to Milton's blindness, or it could refer to the dark days following the restoration of King Charles II, when Milton was imprisoned, although for only a few weeks, until finally pardoned for his part in the civil war. Probably it refers to both. The last two lines refer to Milton's view that God visited him nightly and dictated *Paradise Lost* to him, lines that he then dictated in turn to an amanuensis each following day.

Joe Moshenska has discussed these passages in his recent exploration of light and dark in *Paradise Lost*,³ as did Eleanor Gertrude Brown in detail, and critics' responses to them, in her much earlier work.⁴

During the civil war, Milton's enemies taunted him with his blindness, which they said was a punishment from God. Milton replied to them in his *Defensio secunda*, citing, for example, the cases of men in the Bible, beloved of God, who were nevertheless blind.

Finally, we have *Samson Agonistes*, which is specifically about a blind man. "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves." Near the start there is a long lament from Samson:

"O loss of sight, of thee I most complain! Blind among enemies, O worse than chains, Dungeon or beggary, or decrepit age! Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct, And all her various objects of delight Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased. O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse Without all hope of day!"

Whether this is to be accounted autobiographical is not clear. Even in Sonnet XVI Milton does not complain so loudly, and indeed, by the end of that sonnet he has become reconciled to the fate that has been dealt him. He also seems to have eventually considered his blindness a blessing, since it brought the light of God to him and endowed him with his muse.

Final thoughts

Had Milton's blindness been averted we would undoubtedly have lost the three sonnets in which he discussed it specifically. We would also not have some of the passages in the late works in which he deals with blindness, either autobiographically, or at least in a way that was informed by his experience of it.

That is not to say that we would not have *Paradise Lost* at all, since Milton had long contemplated such a work, certainly from before he even started to become blind. It may be that his inner vision would have been less well developed and that he would not have

experienced the visitations of his muse, but that is impossible to say.

As for *Samson Agonistes*, it is possible that, sighted, he would not have contemplated the subject, but then some other subject would assuredly have occurred to him. Milton was too great a poet not to have produced great works.

There is, however, one consideration, beyond creativity, that might have prevented Milton from producing the works that he did after 1660. The Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion of August 1660 included the names of those who were not pardoned for their part in the war and were therefore condemned to death. Milton escaped such punishment. One of the reasons that he was pardoned for his part in the civil war was said to have been his disability and the view that he had already been punished enough, his blindness having occurred almost exactly during the period of strife. Political expediency might have deprived us of Milton's late works, had he not been blind.

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- 1 Aronson JK. When I use a word. . . . Counterfactual medical history: Milton's blindness. *BMJ* 2022;377:o1441. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1441. pmid: 35697377
- 2 Aronson JK. When I use a word. . . . Counterfactual medical history: Milton's treatment. *BMJ* 2022;377:o1505. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1505. pmid: 35714994
- 3 Moshenska J. *Making Darkness Light: The Lives and Times of John Milton*. Basic Books, 2021.
- 4 Brown EG. *Milton's Blindness*. Octagon Books, 1968doi: 10.7312/brow92002.