

JOHN MILTON'S ANGLO-ITALIAN SONNET CYCLE: A CONTINUING THEMATIC UNITY?

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Abstract: Scholars have long debated the elusive existence of a unifying theme in the English poet John Milton's Anglo-Italian sonnets, whose irregular publication (between 1645 and 1673) obscures potential interconnections. Prior studies emphasize political and revolutionary impulses while often disregarding his profound theological commitments. This paper identifies in the classical and theological virtues the dominant motif in terms of thematic relevance in Milton's baroque-influenced sonnets. Although holding symbolic and structural centrality, these ethical and moral principles are frequently positioned in a tension between worldly and spiritual concerns. This paradoxical dynamic not only assumes symbolic primacy but also exerts structural importance in shaping Milton's poetic architecture, thereby illuminating a general interpretive framework for the sonnet sequence.

Keywords: John Milton. Sonnet. Virtue. Renaissance. Baroque.

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INTRODUCTION

The English poet John Milton composed a total of twenty-four sonnets — eighteen in English, five in Italian, and one caudate sonnet — spanning much of his literary career and reflecting England's political and religious transformations from Stuart absolutism through Civil Wars and republican rule to the Restoration. Although a precise chronology is difficult to establish, the sonnets of the *Paradise Lost* poet were published mostly between 1645 and 1673.

Milton's earliest sonnets, written during and shortly after his years at Cambridge, are largely private love lyrics, often in Italian and shaped by Petrarchan influence, displaying a more naïve and romantic tone than his predominantly serious English sonnets. The mid-period sonnets of the 1640s and 1650s reveal Milton's public and political engagement during the English Civil Wars, the execution of Charles I, and the Interregnum, as they praise figures such as Cromwell and Fairfax, defend civil liberties, and protest religious persecution. His later sonnets, composed in the 1650s and 1660s, mourn personal loss and reflect his blindness resulting probably from glaucoma or retinal issues.

Over the past centuries, considerable scholarly debate has surrounded the question of whether a unifying theme can be discerned across the entire sequence of John Milton's Anglo-Italian sonnets (McCarthy, 1977). Is it possible to propose an underlying organizing principle behind such occasional and thematically varied poems? Given the significantly heterogeneous nature of his sonnet sequence, any attempt to suggest an overarching theme or a totalizing motif based on these texts is necessarily a highly speculative endeavor.

Unlike the sonnet sequences of Petrarch or Shakespeare — which are characterized by thematic continuity and a deliberate construction of logical unity — Milton's sonnets display significant variation in theme, context, and style. Their irregular publication history makes it difficult to recognize patterns interconnecting them with a specific cycle or a thematic sequence. Many studies aiming to establish this connection focus on the poet's political and revolutionary dimensions, often neglecting Milton's theological engagement.

Yet, across the sonnet collection, it is possible to observe a complementary and unmistakably Christian perspective, which begins with an Edenic representation in Sonnet 1 ("O Nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray") and culminates in an apocalyptic vision in Sonnet 23 ("Methought I saw my late espoused saint") (McCarthy, 1977, p. 107). After several years dedicated to translating Milton's sonnets to Portuguese, I offer in the following section a different response to the question of whether a thematic unity — or at least an aesthetic continuity or recurrence of compositional traits — can be identified in Milton's poetic corpus of Anglo-Italian sonnets.

A THEMATIC UNITY IN MILTON'S SONNETS

Throughout the four-year period dedicated to the preparation of the first complete Portuguese translation of Milton's sonnets (Milton, 2025), I identified aspects of a recurring motif: Milton's poetic pursuit of virtues. This is not to suggest that the poet himself embodied these virtues in his personal life or conduct. As C. S. Lewis has already noted, "Milton himself probably failed in the

virtues of obedience and humility” by transgressing the established hierarchical order in his opposition to the monarchy of the Stuarts (Lewis, 1969, p. 79). Except for martyrs and saints, the pursuit of virtue is often frustrated, as humanity remains removed from what would be considered ideal. Nevertheless, in Milton’s Anglo-Italian sonnets, the insistence on this search persists, even in the face of physical, moral, and social limitations.

Although increasingly contested in recent decades, the cultivation of virtue nevertheless retained a central position in the ethical and aesthetic preoccupations of many Renaissance artists. Shakespeare integrates virtues both explicitly and implicitly throughout his dramatic and poetic works. For the sake of concision, a single illustrative example may suffice: in *All’s Well That Ends Well* (Act IV, Scene V), the Countess of Rousillon, mourning the presumed death of Helena, blames her son Bertram for his failure to discern the pernicious influence of companions such as Parolles (Shakespeare, 1994). She attributes the heroine’s tragic fate to Bertram’s obstinacy and negligence, declaring that his actions have brought about “the death of the most virtuous gentlewoman that ever nature had praise for creating” (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 779). This passage not only elevates Helena as a symbol of virtue but also underscores the catastrophic consequences of vice in the Shakespearean moral landscape.

While virtues — as well as vices — are commonly identifiable in practically any artistic production, they are not the dominant in terms of thematic relevance. In Milton’s baroque-influenced sonnets, however, virtues occupy a symbolic and even structural centrality in the articulation of poetic thought, despite the fact that they are frequently situated within a tension between worldly and Christian concerns. In contemporary Milton’s scholarship, amid the prevailing climate of postmodern relativism and skepticism, the virtues that pervade his sonnets have been largely downplayed by critics, owing primarily to the perceived obsolescence of these moral qualities within current intellectual and cultural paradigms.

In certain instances, however, as in Sonnet 19 (“When I consider how my light is spent”), virtues such as Patience are literally personified and engage in direct dialogue with the lyric speaker. In Sonnet 14 (“When Faith and Love which parted from thee never”), virtues associated with Charity are even transformed into anthropomorphic handmaids, endowed with wings, who ascend and address the Son of God. Furthermore, the term “virtue” is explicitly mentioned in numerous Miltonic sonnets, often associated with either a respectable person or a praiseworthy behavior. This recurrence is evident in Sonnet 2 (“*Là onde l’alta tua virtù s’infiora*”)¹, Sonnet 9 (“And at thy growing virtues fret their spleen”), Sonnet 10 (“So well your words his noble virtues praise”), Sonnet 15 (“Thy firm unshaken virtue ever brings”), and Sonnet 20 (“Lawrence of virtuous father virtuous son”).

DISCUSSION

Historically, within the diverse Christian world — whose legacy informs Milton’s writing — the four moral virtues (also termed by certain scholars as the

1 Whereby your high virtue comes to bloom.

classical or cardinal virtues) are generally acknowledged: fortitude (or courage), justice, temperance, and prudence (or personal wisdom). These possess an ancient lineage traceable to Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. To these moral principles are later added three theological virtues — faith, hope, and charity (love or *caritas*) — drawn from 1 Corinthians 13:13. Such classifications, however, do not exhaust the manifold conceptions pertaining to these qualities and gifts (Honderich, 2005, p. 947-948). Additional virtues, regarded as the fruits of the Holy Spirit, are also enumerated in Galatians 5:22-23.

Given this multiplicity of categorizations, this study will necessarily be confined to seven of the virtues briefly enumerated above — namely: (a) fortitude, (b) justice, (c) temperance, (d) prudence, (e) faith, (f) hope, and (g) charity — and will examine, in what follows, how these may manifest respectively in a selection of Milton's Anglo-Italian texts².

- (a) Sonnet 7 ("How soon hath Time"), for instance, which shows Milton's transition from youth to adulthood, may be associated with the virtue of fortitude. Despite the poet's sense of immaturity and anxiety concerning the "subtle" passage of Time (which steals the speaker's youth "on his wings"), he places his trust in "the will of Heaven". This conviction in an unfolding divine plan gives him the strength to proceed with patience amid the vicissitudes inherent in temporality: "All is [...] as ever in my great Taskmaster's eye" (Milton, 2007, p. 144). Similarly, Sonnet 19 ("When I consider how my light is spent") features a despairing lyric persona who laments the underuse of his "talent" owing to blindness. His apprehensions are dispelled by the courageous voice of Patience personified — a variant of the virtue of fortitude — which reassures him that, should he remain resolute and upright beneath his heavy yoke, he will have rendered worthy service to his Creator: "who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best" (Milton, 2007, p. 157-158). Sonnet 22 ("Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear") likewise demonstrates the poet's fortitude: though blind, he continues to "bear up and steer" courageously, placing his confidence in his "better guide" (Milton, 2007, p. 160-161).
- (b) The virtue of justice seems to be dominant in poem number 15 ("Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings"), in which Milton argues that the continuation of the English Civil Wars can be avoided if there is a more consistent political articulation in Parliament so that ethical principles like "truth, and right" may prevail over lies, violence and "public fraud" (Milton, 2007, p. 152-153). Although Sonnet 18 ("Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered saints, whose bones") has a more vengeful connotation, Milton presents to God in his verses the evidence of the Easter massacre of Waldensians in Piedmont in April 1655 so that it may be recorded in the

2 Although the virtues are difficult to delimit precisely, those discussed in this article may be defined as follows: (a) Fortitude denotes strength of mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage. (b) Justice encompasses not only fairness in the treatment of individuals but also the process or result of using laws to adjudicate cases fairly, redress wrongs, and punish crimes. (c) Temperance refers to habitual moderation in action, thought, and feeling, as well as in the indulgence of appetites or passions. (d) Prudence signifies careful, rational behaviour that avoids unnecessary risks and reflects personal wisdom. (e) Faith comprises belief in, trust in, and loyalty to God and / or the doctrines of a religion. (f) Hope represents a confident expectation regarding future events or the anticipation of fulfillment, salvation, or success. Finally, (g) love (or charity) denotes unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the good of another (including God's concern for human-kind) and empathy or care for others. Having offered these brief attempts at definition, it is important to note that these initial delineations are not exhaustive (Honderich, 2005; Timpe; Boyd, 2014). Given that classical and theological virtues have been regarded as essentialist or totalizing for much of the last century, the performative signalling of new parodic and / or politically correct "virtues" seems to have increasingly supplanted the traditional virtues in postmodernist culture.

heavenly book (Apocalypse 5:1), and then the poet demands that divine justice fall upon the murderous troops of Charles Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy. Text number 21 ("Cyriack, whose grandsire on the Royal Bench") also exalts the defense of the laws and condemns those who distort them in the courts (Milton, 2007, p. 159-160). In all these instances, there is an evident cry for justice.

- (c) The virtue of temperance — so highly praised by the writer in his *Areopagitica* (Milton, 2007, p. 938) — could be associated with Sonnet 9 ("Lady that in the prime of earliest youth"), since the virgin lady "wise and pure" honored therein excels in leading a chaste and sober life. In her faithfulness to Christ, she has prudently known how to moderate her appetites to avoid the "broad way" that leads to perdition (Milton, 2007, p. 146). Likewise, Sonnets 20, 21, and 22 recommend restraint not only in food and wine but also in the pursuit of worldly interests. In these poems, Milton advises his young collaborators and friends Lawrence and Skinner to exercise greater temperance so that they may profit from moments of spiritual contemplation (Milton, 2007, p. 158-161). Precisely because Milton was blind, the speaker "saw" beyond the material dimension of things and beings, for he seemed to be free from the optical illusions of the world that clouded the eyes of others and prevented them from recognizing the reality behind superficial appearances³.
- (d) In Sonnet 8 ("Captain or colonel, or knight in arms"), prudence permeates the poem in an implicit manner. This virtue is related to the attitude of one who possesses personal wisdom and therefore acts with caution to prevent errors and their unpleasant consequences. In the poem, Milton beseeches an anonymous leader of the royalist troops — be it a lord or an army official — that, in the event of an invasion of the city of London, he exercises caution and avoid the risk of unnecessary shedding of civilian's blood. Should this invading military leader prove to have prudence and show mercy toward the poet and his family in the same way that Alexander the Great exercised caution and "bid spare / The house of Pindarus", Milton promises to immortalize him through his poetry (Milton, 2007, p. 145). Sonnet 19 also commends those who submit to His "mild yoke" of trials — thereby demonstrating their intrinsic prudence — and who "stand and wait" the return of their Maker to present a "true account" of their talent (Milton, 2007, p. 157-158).
- (e) When we specifically examine the theological virtues, we notice that Sonnet 16 ("Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud") accentuates faith by defending the idea that a pastor should not profit from the State. In the text, there is emphatic criticism against a kind of commercialization of holy things practiced by "hireling wolves whose Gospel is their maw" (Milton, 2007, p. 153-154). The poet suggests that religious leaders must remain independent: they should neither be controlled by the state nor corrupted

3 Even though Milton was a Protestant, the image constructed by this subgroup of sonnets resonates with Joseph Ratzinger's observation that, even during the Middle Ages — a period in which a large mass of people were nominally believers in God — only a smaller number of individuals actually achieved the inner transformation of faith. According to the Pope and theologian, this is due to the essential invisibility of God and implies that truly humanizing belief is a secondary mode of access to reality, whose true metaphysical nature lies beyond our senses (For an extended argument on this topic, see Thornton-Norris (2024, p. 106-107).

by governmental power. Milton views government as merely a secular and material institution, whereas the things of God are timeless and spiritual. This theological virtue also dominates Sonnet 9 (“Lady that in the prime of earliest youth”) because the central character of the poem — an unidentified lady comparable to pious biblical figures such as Mary and Ruth (Luc 10:38-42; Ruth 1:14-17) — is always guided by her faith and by the choice of “the better part,” which refers to attention to the teachings of Christ (Milton, 2007, p. 146). Although Sonnet 23 (“Methought I saw my late espoused saint”) narrates a dream, the poem prefigures the salvation of souls in heaven, reaffirming the speaker’s virtue of faith. The images of Milton’s reunion with his deceased wife, gloriously “washed” and “vested all in white, pure as her mind” (Milton, 2007, p. 163), reveal the poetic speaker’s belief in theological elements like heaven, the remission of sins, and eternal life.

- (f) Sonnet 9 also evokes the theological virtue of hope by directly quoting it in connection with Romans 5:5: “hope that reaps not shame” (Milton, 2007, p. 146). The same word — perhaps detached from a strictly religious sense here — appears in Sonnet 1 (“O Nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray”). Upon hearing this bird’s song in Edenic woods, the young poet’s heart is filled with this optimistic feeling: “Thou with fresh hope the lover’s heart dost fill” (Milton, 2007, p. 139). Later, Sonnet 3 (“*Qual in colle aspro, a l’imbrunir di sera*”)⁴ illustrates this virtue on multiple levels. The young shepherdess (“*giovinetta pastorella*”) fells hope for the flourishing green plant she tends with love, while the speaker hopes to master the Italian language and win the lady’s affection (Milton, 2007, p. 140-141). At the poem’s conclusion, the speaker expresses his hope that his own heart may become equally receptive and open to the influence of divine love.
- (g) Finally, we can identify traces of the theological virtue of charity (love or *caritas*) in Sonnet 14 (“When Faith and Love which parted from thee never”), in which Milton pays posthumous homage to his late Christian friend Catharine Thomason, praising the “good endeavor” she practiced during her earthly journey. The poem particularly emphasizes how her “works and alms” dedicated to the poor followed her to heaven and, before Christ, bore witness to the charitable vocation of her soul (Milton, 2007, p. 151). Sonnet 2 (“*Donna leggiadra il cui bel nome onora*”)⁵ might also be linked to charity, comprehended as the practical manifestation of Christian love (*caritas*). The graceful lady (“*donna leggiadra*”) possesses a gentle spirit (“*spirto gentil*”) that can enchant and inspire everyone who beholds her, especially through the sweetness and dignity of her actions (“*atti soavi*”) (Milton, 2007, p. 140). The poem symbolically suggests that her words and songs have the power to move even the hardest hearts. This description implicitly points to the virtue of charity, understood as a love that is not merely emotional but also expressed through generous acts and the ability to awaken goodness and affection in others. Thus, the benevolent love radiating from the graceful lady inspires the speaker to undergo moral conversion in an attempt to approach the virtuous ideal she embodies

4 As on a bitter ridge with evening dimming.

5 Gracious lady, whose beautiful name honors.

(Fleming, 1986). Almost deified, the “*donna leggiadra*” becomes the object of religious meditation for the poetic speaker, whose own emotional state is relegated to the background in favor of exalting his beloved lady.

These are just a few examples of the virtues we can find throughout Milton's sonnet cycle, which can also be extended to indirect allusions to exemplary historical figures or brave mythological characters. In Sonnet 23, for instance, the poet alludes to the myth of Alcestis, who sacrifices herself to save her husband, Admetus (Milton, 2007, p. 163). By giving up her own life for another, this Greek princess embodies the purest and most heroic form of altruism, which can be linked to the virtue of charity or of the love devoted to one's neighbor. In Sonnet 4 (“*Diodati, e te'l dirò con maraviglia*”)⁶ Milton provides a moving example of friendship and loyalty to his childhood friend Charles Diodati (Milton, 2007, p. 142).

Even the English poet's satirical sonnets — 11 (“*A Book was writ of late called Tetrachordon*”), 12 (“*I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs*”), and the caudate sonnet (“*The New Forcers of Conscience...*”)⁷ — could be associated with some form of virtue. They implicitly exalt virtuous behaviors and attitudes (temperance, justice, charity and faith, among others) by condemning human flaws (such as ignorance, hypocrisy, ingratitude and heresy). His satirical sonnets imply that, when confronted with the opposition produced by human vices, these basic virtues (if they are true) can only thrive. As Milton explains in his *Areopagitica*, true virtues are born precisely from direct confrontation with their opposites:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for; not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure (Milton, 2007, p. 939).

Thus, within Milton's cultural frame of reference, public and private virtues are inseparable. As indicated by poems number 10 (“*Daughter to the good Earl, once President*”) and 21 (“*Cyriack, whose grandsire on the Royal Bench*”), the moral and ethical principles also interconnect the past to the present, for

[...] great ancestry and great ability necessitate great achievement; and as England has supplied such worthies as Sir John Ley and Sir Edward Coke to serve the demands of its past, it has also produced the Lady Margaret Ley and Cyriack Skinner to meet the challenges of its present (Blanchard, 2011, p. 8).

This is precisely why the English poet chose to pay homage to these two related generations of virtuous individuals in his sonnets.

⁶ Diodati, I'll tell you something astonishing.

⁷ Although a few anthologies exclude Milton's atypical poem “On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament” (1673) from the Miltonic sonnet canon, the poem is properly classified as a caudate sonnet (*sonetto caudato*). Milton adapted this form for the English language, drawing on a fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance model (Levin, 2001, p. 342). Milton's tailed sonnet exhibits a striking structural affinity with the sonnet “*I ho già fatto un gozzo in questo stento*”, written by Michelangelo around 1509. Instead of ending at the fourteenth line like a regular sonnet, Milton's poem appends a coda — in this case, a half-line (*mezzo verso*) with a full couplet, followed by a supplementary half-line and another heroic couplet. The twenty-line sonnet's rhyme scheme is *abba-abba-cde-dec-cff-fgg*.

The connection between John Milton's sonnet cycle and the exaltation of virtues did not go unnoticed by William Wordsworth, who in his poem "London, 1802" (1802) calls for the return of the poet of *Paradise Lost* (1667). Without Milton, the Romantic poet declares, England seems to have lost its values and, above all, its virtues, as one can infer from the following passage of the sonnet:

*Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power [...]* (Wordsworth, 2004, p. 151, emphasis added).

It should also be noted that, despite having personally failed to lead a completely virtuous life, the English poet never ceased to exalt these gifts and values. To quote C. S. Lewis's words about the author of *Paradise Regained* (1671) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671): "the poet [John Milton] thought better than he lived and loved higher virtues than he had attained" (Lewis, 1969, p. 79, my emphasis). And in pursuit of them, he developed a vigorous poetic project because "for Milton, his own virtue was his poetry. Again, when the external events of his life looked their bleakest, his 'Muse' — the divine grace of God's Spirit — continued to visit him with the creative power he expressed in his writing" (Bloom, 2003, p. 30). Milton's sonnet cycle represents only a fraction of his creative powers, yet it exemplifies the cohesive thematic unity with which he invested the elevated virtues he championed, particularly within the rapidly transforming socio-political context during the English Commonwealth and Restoration.

CONCLUSION

While Milton's sonnets are primarily occasional rather than a deliberate sequence, they are unified by a Puritan Christian worldview emphasizing moral and civic virtues rooted in biblical ethics and divine providence. Departing from Shakespearean eroticism and Petrarchan idealizations of physical beauty, Milton, also influenced by European baroque, prioritizes the public and spiritual dimensions of character. He celebrates leaders and martyrs through the lens of justice and temperance, while commending women (who follow the example of virtuous figures like Ruth) for their internal moral purity and chastity. These philosophical and theological virtues — inner qualities aligned with the divine will — are frequently contrasted with vice to accentuate a rigorous commitment to both personal and public duty (for an extended argument on this topic, see Milton, 2025, p. 103-177).

Although virtues are difficult to delimit, this research suggests hope dominates the early sonnets (1-10), establishing an aspirational tone. When hope recedes as the poet shifts from youthful optimism to mature realism, charity (or love) persists as a consistent thread, while faith emerges strongly in the final poems. This trajectory moves from "earthly" discipline toward a theological resolution of faith and charity.

The middle sonnets (11-22) emphasize civic classical virtues, particularly justice and temperance. Often paired, these virtues focus on moral discipline and social order. Interestingly, justice appears almost exclusively in poems addressing public affairs and tyranny. Appearing gradually in some of the middle sonnets (14, 19, among others), temperance becomes the dominant virtue in the end of the cycle (23), reflecting personal discipline amid Milton's blindness and loss. As the most frequent virtue, it represents the sequence's central struggle for self-control (Milton, 2025).

In conclusion, the sonnets evolve from an early focus on hope (connected with other theological virtues), through a mid-period emphasis on classical virtues such as civic justice, to a late concentration on a synthesis of classical and theological virtues (especially fortitude, faith, and charity).

O CICLO DE SONETOS ANGLO-ITALIANOS DE JOHN MILTON: UMA UNIDADE TEMÁTICA CONTÍNUA?

Resumo: Diversos especialistas têm debatido há séculos a existência, ainda que muitas vezes elusiva, de um tema unificador nos sonetos anglo-italianos do poeta inglês John Milton, cuja publicação irregular (realizada entre 1645 e 1673) obscurece possíveis interconexões. Estudos anteriores já enfatizam as suas motivações políticas e revolucionárias, porém, frequentemente desconsideram os seus profundos enlances teológicos. O presente artigo identifica nas virtudes clássicas e teológicas o motivo dominante em termos de relevância temática nos sonetos de Milton, devido à sua influência barroca. Embora ocupem uma centralidade simbólica e estrutural, esses princípios éticos e morais são posicionados numa relação tensiva entre as preocupações mundanas e espirituais. Essa dinâmica paradoxal não apenas adquire primazia simbólica, mas também exerce importância estrutural na configuração da arquitetura poética de Milton, possibilitando um quadro de referências interpretativo para a sequência de sonetos.

Palavras-chave: John Milton. Soneto. Virtude. Renascimento. Barroco.

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