

Sonnet 23
John Milton (1673)

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint
Brought to me like *Alcestis* from the grave,
Whom *Joves* great son to her glad Husband gave,
Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint.
Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint, [5]
Purification in the old Law did save,
And such, as yet once more I trust to have
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
Her face was vail'd, yet to my fancied sight, [10]
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd
So clear, as in no face with more delight.
But O as to embrace me she enclin'd,
I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.

Notes:

Sonnets 18, 19, 20, 21, and 23 were numbered XV., XVI., XVII., XVIII., and XIX., respectively in *Poems* (1673).

Introduction. Though some critics assert that the subject of the sonnet, the "late espoused Saint," is Milton's first wife Mary Powell, others argue for his second wife Katherine Woodcock. A third group believes that the poem refers to an ideal or heavenly vision of woman (Hughes, 170-71). Milton married Katherine Woodcock on November 12, 1656 after four years as a widower. She bore their daughter, Katherine, on October 19, 1657. His new wife died only a few months later on February 3, 1658. The poem's reference to being washed from "child-bed taint" appears to point to Katherine Woodcock as the subject of this poem. Because daughter Katherine died about five weeks later, it is natural to suppose that Katherine experienced severe complications surrounding the birth of her only child.

Alcestis. In Euripedes's play *Alcestis*, the heroine sacrifices her life to save her husband Admetus, and is then rescued from death by Hercules. See *Alcestis* 280-325 for the death of Alcestis. Patrick Cheney's important reading of this poem depends upon recognizing an allusion to Plato's *Symposium* in which both Phaedrus and Diotima refer to Alcestis's selfless love for her husband Admetus as a prime example of higher love (*Symposium* 179c and 208d). Diotima defines love as the human desire for immortality (207a).

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Joves great Son. Hercules (or Heracles) was Jove's (Zeus's) son by the mortal woman Alcmena.
as whom. As one whom.

child-bed taint. According to Leviticus 12, giving birth left women ritually unclean.

Purification in the old Law. See Leviticus 12 for the Mosaic rules for purification after childbirth. See also Luke 2:22-24.

vested. Dressed.

all in white. See Revelations 7:14 and 19:8 for descriptions of the blessed enrobed in white.

vail'd. Alcestis is imagined as returning veiled from the grave.

embrace me. Classical mythology tells many stories of failed embraces between the living and the ghosts of the dead. See Homer's *Iliad* 23.99 and *Odyssey* 11.204-10.

enclin'd. Leaned.

brought back my night. Milton may suggest that he recovered his eyesight while dreaming, only to lose it while waking.