

“Expectations of Darkness: The ‘Blind Poet’ P.B. Marston”

Jordan Kistler

University of Birmingham

If he is remembered at all today, Philip Bourke Marston (1850-1887) is remembered as a ‘blind poet’, a protégé of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the later Pre-Raphaelite movement.¹ This essay will demonstrate that in his first volume of poetry, published in 1871, Marston actually fought to establish a poetic identity for himself that was distinct from his visual impairment. A consideration of the 19th century pressures to ‘pass’ as able-bodied or to ‘perform’ his disability, pressures that I will show to be compounded by Victorian ideals of post-Romantic poetic identity, demonstrates Marston’s engagement with contemporary debates over the role and remit of the poet. Disability studies provides a framework in which to reconsider the value of Marston’s work, revealing the original and interesting ways in which he sought to undermine the accepted norms of nineteenth-century lyric poetry. His depictions of sense experience fulfill the ‘fleshly’ ideals of Pre-Raphaelitism in a way that the ‘painterly poems’ of his contemporaries often failed to do. Marston inverts the typical hierarchy of the senses to challenge what David Bolt has termed ‘ocularnormativism’: “the perpetuation of the conclusion that the supreme means of perception is necessarily visual”.² Marston’s poetry suggests that an over-reliance on the visual limits the ways in which poets engage with the natural world. In doing so, he subverts many of the clichés of lyric poetry which the Pre-Raphaelite movement inherited from the Romantics.

A consideration of the critical reception of Marston over the course of his sixteen-year career demonstrates the difficulties he faced in establishing a poetic identity for himself independent from his visual disability. Marston's first volume of verse, *Song-Tide* (1871), published when he was just twenty-one, was praised as being "exceptionally worth notice,"³ and having "undoubted poetic and literary value"⁴ in which "it would be difficult to point out a single imperfection of form".⁵ Of particular interest, however, is the fact that the volume was regularly praised for its "abundance of imagery",⁶ with one critic writing: "The songs are pervaded by a tender melancholy swept by gusts of memory, which are caught and portrayed with a skill so sure and exquisite that we sometimes forget the grief while gazing on the beautiful features of a fair face, or on the suddenly presented glory of a summer landscape" (*New Monthly Magazine*, 117). None of the reviews directly mentions Marston's nearly life-long blindness.⁷

As the *New Monthly Magazine* noted, visual imagery and the kind of pre-eminence of sight among the senses favoured by his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries appears throughout Marston's first volume. The sonnet "A Lake" (p. 11) typifies this kind of poetry:

Thy great calm beauty can reflect the sun;
The stars are mirrored in thee, and the moon
Beholds her image in thy waveless flow,
So cold, and yet so fair to look upon ;
So cold that, even in love's hottest noon,
Thy depths untroubled are more cold than snow.⁸ (ll. 9-14)

Coming early in the volume (it is the fifth sonnet), this poem would seem to uphold the importance of imagery in Marston's poetry. The preponderance of reflections in these lines—of the sun, the stars, and the moon—multiply the images found in the poem, enacting an almost visual overload as the mind's eye moves between them. The verbs

Marston employs make explicit the focus on the act of seeing: “reflect”, “mirror”, “behold”, “look”. Like many of the visual descriptions found in Pre-Raphaelite verse, the lake described here is static: it is “placid”, “silent”, “tranquil”, “smooth”, and “untroubled”. It is a picture, a painting, rather than a living scene of nature.

Despite the initial praise lavished on Marston’s skilful use of imagery in 1871, later critics reacted far differently. Over the course of the next decade, the fact of Marston’s blindness became more widely known. In consequence, it soon became the focus of considerations of his poetry; by the time of his death, he was well known as a ‘blind poet’. Critics writing in the 1880s were, therefore, surprised and frustrated to find that Marston’s poetry did not dwell on his visual impairment, with the *Saturday Review* noting that it was only on “rare instances” that Marston would “[touch] on his bereavement in his poetry”.⁹ This critic further claimed that in Marston’s poetry “every effort was made to seem as though the writer shared the advantages of those whose sight is perfect” (*Saturday Review*, p. 259). Far from praise of his ‘exquisite’ imagery, there is a clear accusation here of duplicity. The reviewer suggests that because Marston was blind, he was not entitled to write poetry that incorporated the visual.

The reality of Marston’s disability led reviewers to suggest that he wrote his poetry merely in imitation of other, better poets, with the clear suggestion that his descriptions of visual images could be nothing other than deception and mimicry. A re-examination of Marston’s verse in the light of modern disability studies, however, points to ways of understanding Marston’s use of visual imagery and the language of sight that help to counter these judgments. A consideration of the biases in-built in the English language, particularly in metaphor and idiom, suggests both the reason why some of Marston’s verse might ‘pass’ as the work of a sighted person and the reason he resisted the impetus to ‘perform’ his disability. Finally, by moving beyond a fixation on the

'sightedness' in Marston's verse, we can consider the nuanced ways in which he experiments with the documentation of full-body human experience.

Julia Miele Rodas has focused on the bias in the English language towards a lexicon of vision, or "language that depends heavily on sight-connoting signs to describe non-visual experience (you *see*?)." ¹⁰ This figurative language is part of what scholars in disability studies term *ocularcentrism*, or "a perspective—and, by extension, a subject position—that is dominated by vision" (Bolt, p. 18). These biases exist in all writing, but are exposed in Marston's verse because of his disability. Rodas continues, "though a blind person may exist in a culture of perception and cognition that differs radically from that of a sighted person, this sharing of language means that, on some level, blind people are necessarily members of and participants in sighted culture and experience" (p. 116). It is, in many ways, a consequence of language itself that Marston's poetry invokes sight in both visual and non-visual terms, as in his poem "Dead Love" (p. 106). This poem begins with the words 'I see', pushing the visual to the forefront, and includes moments of literal vision—"down looking to the lawn with eager eyes/ to see a loved form through the stillness rise" (ll. 77-8)—as well as metaphors of sight—"but see how I have wandered from the verse" (l. 55). These metaphors are part of the very fabric of the English language, and to suggest that Marston is not 'allowed' to use them is to suggest that he should not be granted access to the full range of the language. To avoid these verbal constructions, he would have to remake the patterns of English idiom from the ground up. Though Marston does not go so far as this, I will suggest in this essay that he does challenge the bias towards sight imbedded particularly in poetic language, rejecting clichés of visual description in favour of a writing full-body sense experiences.

By considering the in-built linguistic biases in favour of the able bodied we can further speculate as to why Marston resisted writing his blindness into his poetry. Critics in disability studies argue that the prevalence of idioms of sight in the English language reinforces prejudice against the blind. Lakoff and Johnson include “knowing is seeing” in a list of what they call “primary metaphors”—those learned in early childhood from physical experience.¹¹ Amy Vidali focuses on this linguistic construction in her work on disability and metaphor, suggesting that it “represents blindness as misunderstanding and disorder, while seeing is knowledge and coherence”.¹² Embedded in everyday language, then, is the notion that blindness is synonymous with ignorance, while sight is equated with knowledge. Rodas’s consideration of further metaphorical language such as “blind alley”, “blind rage”, and “blind trust” suggests that language reinforces these stereotypes in insidious ways: “When the blind lead the blind, no one ever gets anywhere. This is, so often, the way language shapes our experience of the world. Even if we know that the blind can be excellent guides of themselves and others, our language bespeaks our unconscious belief that blindness is automatically agnostic, unknowing” (p. 122). The ocularnormative linguistic association between seeing and knowing is compounded by the fact that light is traditionally metaphorically conflated with God and Nature, which often leads to the implication that blind people are incapable of accessing ideas of beauty, compassion, and spirituality. For Marston, writing in the tradition of the Romantics, this is particularly damning. However, I suggest that in his first volume Marston subtly rejects many of the clichés of the Romantic tradition in order to formulate a poetic identity for himself that is neither reliant on his disability, nor denies it.

Though reviewers chided Marston for his reluctance to assume the mantle of ‘blind poet’, I argue that the transformation of his poetic reputation from 1871 to his

death in 1887 suggests a clear reason for that reluctance. As I have shown, the reviews of *Song-Tide* in 1871 did not mention his disability and were largely positive. His obituaries, on the other hand, focused on his visual impairment almost to the exclusion of his literary career, and are couched in condescension and pity. Thus we find Theodore Watts falling back upon the notion of blindness as what Hayhoe calls an “information disability”¹³ in what should be a eulogy for a man that Watts describes as an “intimate” friend.¹⁴ He writes, “it became evident that a life of hopeless blindness was the child’s doom. Though this calamity must doubtless have retarded — greatly retarded — the intellectual development of the child, Philip’s extraordinary endowments and very peculiar temperament were not slow in manifesting themselves” (p. 256). Words like “hopeless” and “doom” undermine the successes Marston found in his lifetime and the happinesses he had, while the suggestion of intellectual “retardation”, while ostensibly part of a compliment, is clearly discriminatory.

Similarly, the *Academy* suggests that what killed Marston in the end was “permanent sorrow, poignant regret, and infinite spiritual weariness.”¹⁵ *The Saturday Review*’s obituary begins with the ignoble assertion, “There has been no more pathetic figure than that of Philip Marston in our recent literary annals” (p. 259). It then continues, “[t]o lack sight is a terrible thing to the wealthy, to the adroit, to the cheerful; and Marston was poor and unskilful and without hope” (p. 259). Here again, ‘skills’ is subtly linked with vision. These nominally ‘kind’ remembrances of Marston reveal the continuing connection between blindness and ignorance, a lack of basic skills, and unending melancholy. These same critics then followed these insinuations with complaints that Marston refused to ‘perform’ his disability for a prurient sighted audience in either his writing or his life. Thus, the *Saturday Review* notes, “Marston had an extraordinary objection, which added greatly to his own social discomfort, to any

reference being made to the fact of his blindness” (p. 260). This critic is suspicious of Marston’s unwillingness to embody the guise of the ‘blind poet’, yet the very obituary he produced suggests that Marston had good reason to be wary of referencing his disability in his work. These obituaries and later reviews reveal the very limited scope of experience that sighted readers expect to find in the writing of a blind author.

Contemporary blind authors’ accounts confirm that readers seeking a ‘true account’ of the experience of blindness often assume that loss will be the main theme and darkness the main image. As Rodas sums up: “That blindness holds its victims in thrall, that it extinguishes their light, their capabilities, their possibilities; that blindness is darkness, imprisonment, death; these are inescapable associations” (p. 127).

Narratives of disability, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note, are supposed to follow a set pattern: “this narration must inevitably show how we conquer our disabilities or how they eventually conquer us”.¹⁶ These patterns of narrative are what David Bolt has called the “metanarrative of blindness”, “the story in relation to which those of us who have visual impairments often find ourselves defined, an overriding narrative that seems to displace agency” (p. 10). This metanarrative is necessarily reductive and, as Bolt explores, redefines people with visual impairments as characters in a story created by those *without* visual impairments. The assumptions and expectations inherent in the metanarrative of blindness are readily apparent in the reviews and obituaries of Marston already quoted.

Bolt and Mitchell and Snyder point to the stereotypes and clichés of blindness that stretch into the current day; I argue, however, that these expectations were particularly prevalent for Marston due to the era and the genre of his poetry. Mid-nineteenth-century lyric poetry brings with it its own set of expectations for readers, which intersect in significant ways with the expectations placed upon blind writers. The

legacy of Romanticism, with its pretence of spontaneous outpourings of genius, led to a conflation of the interiority and subjectivity of nineteenth-century lyric poetry with the personal or confessional mode. Throughout the mid-century, critics routinely decried poets for the content of their work, under the assumption that all opinions expressed in lyric poetry must be those of the poet himself. Critical attacks upon the character of Marston's Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries, such as Algernon Swinburne and D.G. Rossetti, attest to the rather blurry line between poet and persona during this period. That Marston's poetry was read as subjective and personal is evident in the opinion of Watts: "The poet pure and simple has no idea that poetry can exist apart from sincerity; such a poet was Philip Marston" (p. 256). I suggest, however, that in *Song-Tide's* resistance to explicit biographical writing we can see Marston enacting a protest against the Romantic ideal of the poet and the expectations that ideal brings to bear upon Victorian lyric poetry. By resisting a performance of blindness in his verse, Marston further resists the automatic conflation of poet with poetry that was so prevalent at the time he was writing.

The Romantic tradition of lyric poetry further complicates the reception of Marston's own verse because of the associations developed, first by the Romantics and then by their mid-century inheritors, between blindness and poetic inspiration. Mitchell and Synder's idea of "narrative prosthesis" is a useful way of interrogating this topos in the light of Marston's real visual impairment. A consideration of the myriad problems in the standard construction of blindness in nineteenth-century verse helps to reveal the ways in which Marston sought to distinguish himself from his contemporaries. The trope of the 'blind bard' has been well documented by Edward Larrissy in *The Blind and Blindness in the Literature of the Romantic Period* (2007) and Catherine Maxwell in *The Female Subline: Bearing Blindness* (2001). Larrissy argues that

Romantic poets invoked blindness as a metonym for genius: “the Romantic period is indebted to ‘the ancient topos of the blind poet or seer, a visionary whose sight, having lost this world’s presence, is directed entirely beyond to the spiritual’.”¹⁷ Larrissy suggests that this topos “has to do with the development of the inwardness which Charles Taylor sees as integral to the modern self” (p. 10). For the Romantics, then, blindness was symbolic of visionary insight and self-discovery. This association was carried forward into the Victorian period, as Maxwell clearly demonstrates. Maxwell argues that nineteenth-century poetry invokes disfigurement as shorthand for longed-for poetic genius, using as an example Matthew Arnold’s “The Strayed Reveller” (1849): “the phrase ‘bearing blindness’ means to suffer or endure blindness, where blindness is the burden of the poets who would attain the vision of the gods”.¹⁸ The stock figure of the ‘blind bard’, strongly associated with the seer, draws on the tradition of Homer, Milton, and Ossian, as well as mythological figures such as Tiresias, a visionary granted the gift of prophecy in compensation for his blindness. By embracing this figure, nineteenth-century poets appealed to Enlightenment theories of sense experience like those of Edmund Burke, which suggested that the compensation of the other senses would grant blind people a greater than average facility in the employment of poetic language. In Burke’s theory, the musical power of words, or the “exploitation of associations” replaces the visual, or the mere “capacity to make pictures”.¹⁹ Ideas of compensation were actively applied to real-world communities of disabled people, forming the basis for the prevalence of music instruction and touch-based learning in nineteenth-century institutions for the blind.²⁰

In some ways, it is no wonder that critics sought descriptions of blindness in Marston’s work, given that it was so prevalent in the poetry of his Romantic forebears and his own contemporaries, including his idol Swinburne. However, the stock

character of the blind poet which Larrissy and Maxwell trace throughout the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a clear example of what Mitchell and Snyder term “narrative prosthesis”, defined as “perpetual discursive dependency upon disability”, “first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (p. 47). Mitchell and Snyder argue that narrative prosthesis is a “crutch” for literature to suggest “representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (p.49). For the poets that Maxwell and Larrissy consider, blindness is used to suggest a holistic experience of the external world, with an emphasis on non-visual sensory detail. As Maxwell says of Swinburne, “Swinburne’s blindness, while it may refuse pictorial vision, certainly does not refuse vision altogether ... Rather, a conventional form of looking is replaced by something more difficult which does not vouchsafe the easy satisfaction of the eye” (p. 195). This metaphorical blindness has very little to do with the lived experience of visual impairment as Marston experienced it. Though these poets portray blindness as a positive attribute, for those living with visual disabilities in the nineteenth century, reality was far different. As Martha Stoddard Holmes points out:

In the nineteenth century, the challenge of living with cultural constructions of disability was incrementally more complex. If you were blind, deaf, or otherwise physically impaired in nineteenth-century England, your bodily experience was habitually described as “afflicted,” “deprived,” or even “defective”... most nondisabled people resisted the idea that disabled people could work, learn, or have families. Given this cultural context, how could a person with a disability build a life of economic stability, much less develop a satisfying sense of self?²¹

The ‘deprivation’ which we saw mentioned in nearly every obituary written for Marston stands in stark contrast to the ‘compensation’ heralded by sighted poets writing in the persona of the blind bard. Neither Larrissy nor Maxwell, in their otherwise very capable studies, considers the problematic nature of these metaphorical uses of blindness. Maxwell’s Freudian reading of the trope of the blind bard, which

conflates blindness with castration, compounds this problem. Disability studies, however, provides ample tools to interrogate the cliché of the blind bard in light of the reality of visual impairment.

Mark Paterson points to the notion of disability as a 'gift' as a troubling one: "we might consider the strangeness of a gift the recipient cannot refuse, give back, defer; a gift that, like death, one has no choice but to accept".²² Like the biased language discussed earlier, these kinds of metaphors uphold dangerous stereotypes regarding disability, including the suggestion that those with disabilities must outwardly perform gratitude for their remaining faculties. Furthermore, it is clear that the "transgressive potential" invoked in these metaphorical representations of disability do not extend to a real-world disabled community, as Mitchell and Snyder note:

While literature often relies on disability's transgressive potential, disabled people have been sequestered, excluded, exploited, and obliterated on the very basis of which their literary representations so often rest. Literature serves up disability as a repressed deviation from cultural imperatives of normativity, while disabled populations suffer the consequences of representational associates with deviance and recalcitrant corporeal difference (p. 8).

As Mitchell and Snyder suggest, while the depictions of blindness might appear on the surface to be positive, they clearly reinforce a divide between disabled people and what is held to be 'normal' within a community. Narrative prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder argue, "lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the 'norm'" (p. 47). The individual poet may prize this idiosyncrasy, but it further reinforces the perception of those with disabilities as both different and separate. In *Song-Tide*, then, Marston actively resisted the discourse of his contemporaries in his refusal to write himself into the tradition of the blind bard, an idea which we have seen merely reinforces the negative connotations of literal blindness. His refusal to participate in this tradition should be read as an active protest

against the limitations commonly ascribed to the blind community—those his reviewers clearly expected to find in his verse.

I argue that Marston's use of imagery and language of sight demonstrates not only his resistance to being labelled a 'blind poet', but further evinces a rejection of the entire Romantic tradition of the spontaneous genius of the poet as well as the frequent conflation of poetic persona and poet by the mid-century critical press. The complaints of the nineteenth-century reviewers regarding Marston's use of the visual raise interesting questions about the perceived role of the poet: exactly what *are* poets entitled to write about? How much are they allowed to fabricate, and what are they barred from? Why was it deemed strange to find descriptions of a 'fair face' or a 'summer landscape' in the verse of a blind man, but not the first-person voice of a woman in the works of Tennyson? Rather than suggesting that his poetry demonstrates a pretence of sight, I argue that for Marston vision is merely another realm of the imagination that he may access as a poet. *Song-Tide* should be read as Marston's contribution to the critical debates that raged during the 1860s and 70s around the appropriate sphere of the poet—a debate evident in Swinburne's indignant rebuttal to the negative reviews of *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Marston rejects the slippage between lyric poetry and the personal that would suggest that his poetry should offer a performance of blindness, and instead employs the visual as a demarcation between the personal and the persona in his verse. Thus, in "Dead Love" the persona of a man on the brink of war—far removed from Marston's own biography—is immediately signalled by the first words of the poem: "I see". Marston's use of sighted language in this poem—the speaker and his beloved "look", "gaze", and "see" approximately twenty-five times within the 162-line poem—is not just an acceptance of the commonplace in English idiom; it is a protest against attempts to limit the imagination of the poet. Furthermore,

Marston's poetry clearly rejects the cliché of the Romantic poet invoked in the prophetic inward vision of the 'blind bard'. His use of visual description reveals poetic language to be a learned vocabulary rather than "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", and can be read as a deliberate subversion of contemporary ideals of poetic identity.²³

In the second half of this essay, I will consider the ways in which Marston forged a new poetic identity for himself in his early verse—one that is representative of his blindness, but resists the expectations of disability often enforced by the able-bodied community. In the opening sections of *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Synder foreground the two—potentially equally damaging—paths seemingly open to those with disabilities: passing or performance. That these are the expectations Marston wrestled with throughout his career is evident in the reviews I have already quoted—for many sighted critics, Marston either *was* the blind bard or he was pretending to be otherwise.

Mitchell and Synder write:

In order to disassociate one's disability from stigmatizing associations, disabled people are encouraged to 'pass' by disguising their disabilities. Prosthetic devices, mainstreaming, and overcompensation techniques, all provide means for people with disabilities to 'fit in' or to 'de-emphasize' their difference (p.3).

To many, Mitchell and Synder suggest, this seems like the better alternative, because "to introduce one's disability into discourse (social or academic) is to suddenly have that single aspect subsume all others" (p.xi). The alternative, performance, means becoming one's disability.

The pressures Marston would have faced to either 'pass' or 'perform' in mid-century Britain can be helpfully illustrated by the example of the advent of Braille. Braille was accepted as the standard in printing for the blind by the British and Foreign Blind Association in 1870, but several other systems of printing had been developed

alongside Braille, including the printing of raised Latin letters. Though those with visual impairments largely preferred Braille, many sighted educators of blind students advocated for the Latin system because it allowed for greater assimilation into ‘normal society’. They objected to Braille because it highlighted difference rather than homogeneity. Sighted people were unable to read Braille without learning the new system, and therefore some saw it as creating another unnecessary chasm between those who were blind and those who were not.²⁴ At the same time, there was a strong association in the Victorian period between blindness and begging, a connection which further problematized the adoption of finger reading by the blind community. Blind beggars incorporated the new literacy granted to them into their begging by staging performances of finger reading in the streets. These performances were the opposite of the assimilation some hoped for; they instead turned blind literacy into a spectacle (Warne, p. 68). Like these street spectacles, the interest of sighted readers in the writing of blind authors like Marston has an unpleasant tinge of disability tourism.

A re-examination of Marston’s poetry outside of the limiting realms of passing and performance reveals a poet who wrote about perception in startling ways in an effort to remake what it meant to be a nineteenth-century poet. I argue that Marston resisted both performance *and* passing—despite what the critic for the *Saturday Review* suggested—and in so doing he rejected both the clichés of blindness and clichés of lyric poetry as a whole in order to foreground the potential for accounts of a full-body experience of the external world.

Disability Studies provides us with a number of useful terms for considering the ways in which Marston presents sensual experience within his poetry. In “Looking on Darkness, which the blind do see”, Mark Paterson suggests an alternative to vision

which he calls “seeing feelingly”, or “seeing through the body” (p. 160). Seeing in this way denies ocularcentrism, or the importance placed on vision by sighted people, which informs their fear of blindness as darkness and obscurity, and it also denies a direct form of compensation that treats the remaining senses as prostheses for the eyes, a notion also largely formulated by the sighted.²⁵ Paterson calls this “haptocentric perception”, suggesting that the plasticity of the human body allows for an actual reconfiguration of “sensory pathways” in order to heighten “tactile and acoustic acuity and attunement to the somatosensory system (including balance, kinaesthesia, and proprioception)” (p. 166). These ideas move beyond the nineteenth-century rhetoric of compensation as visual prosthesis to a scientific understanding of the incredible ability of the human body to adjust for differences of experience. This compensation is not the clichéd groping hand upon the wall, but almost a sixth sense which accounts for changes in air pressure and acoustic information in order to ‘feel’ an object which takes up space in the same room as the blind subject.

Though Marston does at times use the ‘primary metaphor’ of ‘seeing is knowing’, as in “Dead Love”, throughout *Song-Tide* he also works to challenge that metaphor, as in the sonnet “Known Too Well” (p. 18):

Lo! now, how well I know the thing thou art ;
Not more the colour of your hair and eyes
I know than all your various tones and sighs ;
The laugh half-song, half-moan, that comes to part
The low clear voice, and placid as the heart,
Which, being stainless, needeth no disguise,
Serene and pure as moonlight seas and skies
Wherethrough no thunders roll, no lightnings dart.
The music of your voice by heart I have ;
Yea, every tone, and semi-tone I know,
The sound of taken breath, divinely sweet,
The touch of fingers, and the fall of feet ;
I know you better than the wind the wave,
The sun the heavens, or the Alps the snow. (ll. 1-14)

In this sonnet, knowing is not equated with seeing, even in a linguistic or metaphorical sense. Instead, Marston challenges what Constance Classen refers to as “the eye-minded philosophy of the Enlightenment” and the nineteenth century’s insistence on vision as the primary means of acquiring information.²⁶ He offers a different way of “knowing” in which the sound of footfalls takes on the significance of a beloved face and the touch of fingers is far more intimate than the visual experience of “the colour of your hair and eyes”. This is not a one-to-one substitution between the senses; Marston makes clear his preference for this full-body knowledge. The poem further enacts a wider attack upon the tradition of visually-dominated love poetry, like that found in the sonnets of D.G. Rossetti. Marston dismantles the traditional elements of the blazon, a mere catalogue of body parts, in order to suggest a deeper knowledge of another being that encompasses all the senses, not just the visual. His beloved is not a picture, but a living, breathing human being. “Every tone, and semi-tone” suggests a depth and variety of ‘knowing’, a complex and complete picture of the person, not offered by the flat one-dimensionality surface appearances. In this rejection of the Petrarchan ideal of love poetry, we can see Marston falling far more in line with Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal than the male Pre-Raphaelite poets he was accused of imitating.

Marston further purposefully aligns this deeper knowledge with the natural world. Here he challenges another commonly-held idea about the experiences of the blind, as expressed by Watts in his obituary for Marston:

As compared with the other physical faculties, the transcendent importance of vision (typified in the old wrestle of the gods for light) lies in this, that without vision there can be but an imperfect communing with the only consoler in the deepest sorrow — Nature. The mourner who in the hour of his mourning gazes at the sunrise or watches the sea as it answers the cloud pageantry of evening can bear with patience calamities which his imagination had, perhaps, depicted as unbearable (p. 256).

In "Known Too Well", Marston not only suggests his ability to know the natural world without recourse to the visual, but creates new, positive associations with blindness by reminding readers that the wind, the sun, and the land are all themselves 'blind', and yet intimately entwined with the rest of the natural world. He appropriates the natural themes of the Romantic tradition of poetry, recreating them into new forms. The poem imagines the natural world as a web of networks, a picture of connectivity that supersedes the distance that is necessarily inflicted by the viewing eye, what Classen refers to as "the detachment of sight, distancing spectator from spectacle" (p. 6). Knowledge that employs all the senses is necessarily more immediate and more intimate.

Marston's depictions of haptocentric perception strive to give dimension to the flat stereotypes of blindness that pervaded Victorian discourses of disability. David Bolt points to the common trope in works that employ 'aesthetic blindness', or blindness as narrative prosthesis, of a blind person confusing night with day. He points out that this idea assumes "the knowledge of place as well as time is gained by solely visual means".²⁷ "The supposed irrelevance of the heat, sounds, smells, and emotions brought by sunrise has not only aesthetic but epistemological implications, as knowing the difference between midday and midnight comes to require the sense of sight" (p. 98). Within *Song-Tide*, Marston's descriptions of nature tackle the common ocularcentric disregard for the remaining senses, employing the Pre-Raphaelite 'fleshly' style to emphasize smell, sound, and touch as valid ways of experiencing and knowing the natural world, as in the sonnet "Summer's Return" (p. 62) in which he writes of the "sultry silence of the summer night" (l.9), reminding readers that temperature and sound are valid, non-visual, ways of determining time, as Bolt highlighted. In *Song-Tide*, Marston overturns the traditional ocularnormative hierarchy of the senses that places

sight at the pinnacle of experience. In the remaining pages of this essay, then, I will consider the ways in which Marston documents smell, sound, and finally touch, which he situates forcefully at the apex of physical experience.

In *Worlds of Sense*, Constance Classen traces historical hierarchies of the senses to explain why the modern Western world places so much emphasis upon the visual. She notes: “it would seem that no sense has suffered such a reversal of cultural fortune as smell, from being a sense of heady spiritual and medicinal power in pre-modern Europe, to being a non-sense, a sensory black sheep, in the modern West” (p. 15). Though it is not the dominant sense in his poetry, Marston does move beyond the typical Pre-Raphaelite clichés of the ‘perfume’ and ‘scent’ of flowers. In “Summer’s Return” Marston writes of the “scent of roses just begun” (l.4), which suggests a subtler understanding of the smell of roses than is typical, in which the stages of growth can be documented by odour, rather than sight. In this poem, the scent of new roses acts as a calendar for the speaker, helping him to mark the passage of time. The synaesthesia-driven imagery of “a queenly rose of sound with tune for scent” (l.9) in “Sonnets to a Voice: II” (p. 55) offers another intriguing way of depicting the poetic rose that resists the visual as the scent of the rose becoming entwined with the sound of the beloved’s voice. Here, again, we can see Marston’s efforts to remake the familiar in poetry, offering new ways of considering often hackneyed imagery.

Gardens were, in fact, a favorite topic of Marston’s, so much so that when Louise Chandler Moulton collected his verse after his death she published a separate volume just for the garden poems (*Garden Secrets* of 1887). It is in these garden poems that Marston demonstrates the full range of perception beyond the visual. Odour, of course,

is prevalent in his description of flowers, as we have just seen. However, in “Garden Reverie” (p.94) he moves beyond the typical to define his garden through sound:

But in this space of narrow ground
We call a garden here—
Because less loudly falls the sound
Of traffic on the ear, (ll. 9-12)

This is one of Marston’s more pleasing rhyme schemes, alternating eight and six syllable lines with an abab rhyme which provides more tonal variation than many of his verses. The loveliness of a garden enclave in the rush of a city is conjured effortlessly, merely through the relief of the absence of noise. This poem begins with the words “I hear”, and marks sound out as the dominant force of the poem.

In fact, in the sonnet “Love Past Utterance” (p. 51) Marston declares sound to be the *métier* of the poet, and leaves the visual to the painters, suggesting a break with the artistic interminglings so prevalent within the poetry of his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries. In his comparison of the painter to the poet, Marston asserts that the work of a poet is to describe “the marvel of your voice”, “show the laugh that thrills me”, and “the very recollection of your touch” (ll. 10-12). For Marston then, despite the moments of visual description that appear throughout his verse, sound and touch are the domain of the poet, while the visual is the realm of the painter. This, too, can be seen as an attempt to break with the Romantic tradition that pervaded Victorian lyric poetry.

It is not unusual, of course, to demarcate sound as the primary sense of poetry—though it was a departure from the work of Marston’s fellow Pre-Raphaelites. For Marston, however, a formal emphasis on the aural—or even the oral—was necessitated by his disability; his poetry was created aloud, rather than silently on the page.²⁸ The formal care that Marston took with the sound of his poetry is evident in the sonnet “Love’s Music” (p. 61):

But sad and wilder did that music grow,
And, like the wail of woods by storm gusts swayed,
While yet the awful thunder's wrath is stayed,
And Earth lies faint beneath the coming blow,
Still wilder waxed that tune ; until at length
The strong strings, strained by sudden stress and sharp,
Of that musicians hand intolerable,
And jarred by sweep of unrelenting strength,
Sundered, and all the broken music fell. (ll. 5-13)

Alliteration is the primary technique used here to heighten the link between the words and the music they describe. The poem's intensity builds, past "wail of woods" and "storm gusts swayed" and "wilder waxed", the alliteration growing closer and closer together, until the poem (and the music) reaches its climax in line 10: "The strong strings, strained by sudden stress and sharp". In other contexts, the six s sounds might be excessive, but Marston utilizes them well to bring the poem to a fever pitch, from which it can do nothing but crash in the final quartet. He picks up the s sound again on "strength" in line 12, carrying us rapidly onto line 13 and the heaviness of "sundered", its central vowel sound sinking like a leaden weight before the break of the caesura. The reader can almost hear the tinkling of the pieces of "broken music" as they fall in the remainder of the line, their lightness contrasted with the emphasis before the caesura, as the whole of the music shatters apart into small pieces.

The content and the form of Marston's verse, then, place sound above sight in the hierarchy of the senses. As suggested in "Love Past Utterance", however, Marston felt it was not just sound—"your voice", "the laugh"—but also the experience of *touch* that was the remit of the poet—"the very recollection of your touch". It is, I suggest, in his representation of touch or haptic perception that we find the most interesting departures from the poetry of Marston's contemporaries. In his musings on voice, particularly the voice of his beloved, Marston marries aural and haptic perception by focusing on the way voice manifests in "breath" and "air". In "The Last Betrothed" (p. 8),

for instance, Marston details a full-bodied awareness of the speaker's beloved. There is a shift in the air when she comes near, and he feels her breath touch his face. The wind, her breath, and her voice thus entwine in a sensuous experience that supersedes the visual.

I sat ; when, lo, sitting, I was 'ware
Of breath that fell in sighs upon my face,
While like a harp, wherethrough the night wind plays
 A sorrowful, delicious, nameless air,
 A voice wherein I felt my soul had share
Made music in the consecrated place. (ll. 3-8)

The poem explicitly links awareness to touch. Like the footfalls in "Known Too Well", Marston details ways of knowing and sensing his beloved that move beyond the need to see her face. The sonnet "Too Near" (p. 13) expands upon this kind of sense experience:

So close we are, and yet so far apart,
 So close, I feel your breath upon my cheek;
 So far, that all this love of mine is weak
To touch in any way your distant heart ;
So close, that, when I hear your voice, I start
 To see my whole life standing bare and bleak ; (ll. 1-6)

Parallel construction intimately pairs touch and sound in lines 2 and 5: "I feel", "I hear". Marston conjures the tantalizing closeness of another person, the touch of their breath and the sound of their voice, louder in that closeness than is expected. The repetition of "so close" and "so far" gives a sense of swaying in and away from the magnetic power of another body, so close to one's own. In line 6 vision intrudes, but only to document an experience of loss. The speaker sees only absence: "my whole life standing bare and bleak". In this poem, then, sight is the least fulfilling of the senses. The suddenness of the enjambment from lines 5 to 6—"I start / To see"—emphasizes the negative associations Marston grafts onto the visual and signals the turn in this sonnet to themes of despair

and loss. The presence of the beloved does not return after this jarring encroachment of the visual.

We can see, then, the ways in which Marston subtly remakes the traditional hierarchy of the senses, privileging smell, sound, and touch over sight. In his “Garden Secrets” series, Marston reaches the pinnacle of this haptocentric perception. In this series of poems, the speakers are flowers, trees, and the wind, and thus their experiences of the world are necessarily non-visual, similar to the blind nature depicted in “Known Too Well”. The feeling of another body near to one’s own, a sixth sense of “atmosphere-thickening occupants of space,”²⁹ explored in both “The Last Betrothed” and “Too Near”, is the vivid heart of the poem “What the Rose Saw” (p. 166):

The Lily.—What said she to thee when she came anear?
The Rose.—No word, but o’er me bent till I could hear
The beating of her heart, and feel her blood
Swell to a blossom that which was a bud.
Alas, I have no words to tell the bliss
When on my trembling petals fell her kiss ;
Sweeter than soft rain falling after heat,
Or dew at dawn was that kiss soft and sweet. (ll. 8-15)

The visual is referenced in the title of this poem, yet the rose hears and feels the woman — it does not see her. In the lines above, it is not only the visual that is denied; even the aural takes a backseat to the haptic. “No words” repeats twice — the woman and the rose are both silent in the moment of nearness and touch. The rose first hears the beating of the woman’s heart, but Marston then moves closer to have the rose *feel* the movement of her blood. Commonplace descriptions take on a subtler meaning as Marston removes clichéd images, like rainfall, from the visual or aural to the haptic. The relief of a rain after heat offers a form of release that is practically tangible to the reader, emphasizing the physical sensuality of the kiss that falls on “trembling petals”.

The choice of the word “swell” to describe the maturation of the rose blossom is another unusual one, and shifts the experience from the visual perception of the unfolding petals to the rose’s own experience — another full-body one. The sexual connotation is obvious, but Marston further undermines expectations by shifting the rose from object of the male gaze to the subjective, detailing its own pleasure, its own swelling with blood and desire. The unfolding of the rosy petals is far more explicitly sensuous when described in these haptic terms, especially as the customarily female rose denies the priapism normally denoted by a sexual ‘swelling’. The latent homoeroticism of this encounter undermines traditional expectations, as does Marston’s description of the moment of meeting. He rejects what Bolt describes as “the ophthalmocentric notion that eyes and vision are fundamentally sexual, that they are necessary conditions of normative sexuality” (p. 13) which often links blindness with castration (as in the Oedipal myth), in order to document a truly ‘fleshly’ form of sexuality.

Far from trying to ‘pass’ as sighted, we have seen that throughout *Song-Tide* Marston works to subvert the eminence of the eye and suggest new ways of writing about the natural world. In so doing, he distances himself from the Romantic tradition which privileged the sight of nature over other sense experiences as well as encouraged clichéd notion of the ‘true poet’ that lingered on into the Victorian period. Marston strove to define himself as a poet who happened to be blind, rather than a ‘blind poet’, and in doing so, attempted to redefine the remit of the Victorian poet.

¹ Marston was blind from very early childhood. He had surgery as a boy to attempt to correct his vision, but it was unsuccessful. See Louise Chandler Moulton’s biographical introduction to *The Collected Poems of Philip Bourke Marston* (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1892).

² David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 14.

-
- ³ "Some Recent Books", *Fortnightly Review* 10.55 (July, 1871): 127.
- ⁴ "The Poems of Philip Bourke Marston", *New Monthly Magazine* 149.607 (July 1871): 122.
- ⁵ "Mr Philip Marston's Poems," *Examiner* 3308 (Jun 24, 1871): 634.
- ⁶ "Song-Tide and Other Poems," *The Spectator*, 44.2265 (Nov 25, 1871): 1437.
- ⁷ *The New Monthly Magazine* writes of Marston's "Prelude" that it contains "a hint (in one of the stanzas) of something other than and different from mood, which blends and applies those sombre tints in which the work abounds," (118) which may have been referring to the suggestions of blindness in that poem.
- ⁸ Philip Bourke Marston, *Song-Tide and other poems* (London: Ellis and Green, 1871), p. 11, ll: 9-14.
- ⁹ "Philip Bourke Marston," *The Saturday Review*, 63.1634 (Feb 19, 1887): 259.
- ¹⁰ Julia Miele Rodas, "On Blindness," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 3.2 (2009): 116.
- ¹¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 53
- ¹² Amy Vidali, "Seeing What We Know: Disability and theories of metaphor," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.1 (2010): 34.
- ¹³ Simon Hayhoe, *God, Money, and Politics: English Attitudes to Blindness and Touch, from the Enlightenment to Integration* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2008), p. 52.
- ¹⁴ Theodore Watts, "Mr Philip Bourke Marston", *The Athenaeum* 3095 (Feb 19, 1887):256-7.
- ¹⁵ William Sharp, "Obituary", *The Academy* 772 (Feb 19, 1887): 129.
- ¹⁶ David T. Mitchell with Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000), p. xi.
- ¹⁷ Edward Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007), p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Catherine, Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Quoted by Larrissy on p. 15.
- ²⁰ See Hayhoe, *God, Money and Politics* (2008).
- ²¹ Martha Stoddard Holmes, "Working (with) the Rhetoric of Affliction," *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, edited by James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Vilson (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2001), p. 27.
- ²² Mark Paterson, "'Looking on Darkness, which the blind do see': Blindness, Empathy, and Feeling Seeing," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 46.3 (September 2013): 166.
- ²³ William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 3rd edition (London: T.N. Longman, 1802), p. xi.
- ²⁴ Vanessa Warne, "'So that the sense of touch may supply the want of sight': Blind Reading and Nineteenth-Century British Print Culture," *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch* edited by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), p. 54.
- ²⁵ Jan Eric Olsén, "Vicariates of the Eye: Blindness, Sense Substitution, and Writing Devices in the Nineteenth Century," *Mosaic* 46.3 (Sept 2013): 89.
- ²⁶ Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 27.
- ²⁷ David Bolt, "Aesthetic Blindness: Symbolism, Realism, and Reality". *Mosaic* 46.3 (September 2013): 98.
- ²⁸ All biographical accounts suggest that Marston never learnt finger-reading or other technologies of literacy for the blind. His mother and sisters read to him, and recorded the poetry that he dictated.
- ²⁹ Georgina Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture: an eyewitness account," *Journal of Visual Culture* 4.2 (2005): 186.