Sonnet 19
John Milton (1651-1655)

When I consider how my light is spent,
E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present [5]
My true account, least he returning chide,
Doth God exact day labour, light deny'd,
I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts, who best [10]
Bear his milde yoak, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite.

Notes:

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

Introduction. Dates ranging from 1651 to 1655 have been suggested for this sonnet, but Barbara Lewalski's recently articulated case for late in 1652 appears to agree best with the few clues available (The Life of John Milton 289). The sonnet's second line has often led readers to assume an earlier date because no one in the seventeenth century would express confidence about living much past 70, if that. If he wrote this line in 1652, he would be counting on 86 years. Milton's own father lived to be at least 84. Lewalski also reminds us that Milton often understated his age and predated several poems in the 1645 Poems. He was anxious about his age and his personal attractiveness. He was also anxious about vocational belatedness. By 1652 Milton was totally blind. He had spent years fulfilling his duties to the Council of State. Now he was under malicious attack for defending Cromwell's government to the world and for his own advocacy of divorce. The anonymous Regia Sanguinis Clamor ad Cœum Adversus Parracidas Anglicanos (The Hague, 1652) even ridiculed his blindness (see Lewalski 289). He had always meant to write a great English epic, and now it must have seemed impossible. If he worried about belatedness at his twenty-fourth birthday ("How Soon Hath Time"), by age forty-three he must have been tempted to bitterness and despondency. This brilliant sonnet is proof enough that his talent has not been rendered "useless" by age and blindness.

When I consider. Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 contains a similar first line (find "When I consider").
dark world and wide. Milton further mourns his loss of sight in Paradise Lost 3.22-55 and Sonnet 22 1-5.

one Talent. See the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

day labour. See the parable of the bridegroom in Matthew 25:1-13 and also John 9:4.

fondly. Foolishly. See OED2.

milde yoak. Jesus states "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" in Matthew 11:30.

Thousands at his bidding. Psalm 68:17 and Zechariah 1:10 mention the activity of God's servants on Earth.