John Milton does not dissociate human sexuality from holiness or virtue. Adam and Eve engage in sexual intercourse while living in paradise, but it does not threaten their innocence. However, Adam and Eve’s sex after the fall produces guilt and troubled sleep. So, at what point do sex and, by extension, reproduction become sinful in the Miltonic universe? Two specific sexual encounters offer potential answers, the first being Satan’s conception of Sin, and Sin’s impregnation by her father and her son. Though Satan’s sexual and reproductive acts mirror those taken by God at times, Satan’s evil distorts sexuality in cause and effect. The second scenario is Adam and Eve’s sex that directly follows their eating of the forbidden fruit. The ancestors of man feel a new kind of lust after the fall, a lust that burns them and makes sexuality a covetous force. Adam, for example, seizes Eve’s hand to pull her to their marriage bed, and though this parallels Adam’s seizing Eve’s hand to pull her from her own reflection, the surrounding circumstances indicate that this seizure bears a different weight. Moreover, Milton’s “Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce” posits that true marriage hinges on the wish to join oneself conjugally with “a fit conversing soul.” The notion of conversation implies reciprocity in the relations of pure lovers. In other words, Milton holds sinless love as essentially selfless. In Adam and Eve’s post-fall sex and Satan’s incest, love becomes perverted, supplanted by selfish desire. Here, the boundary emerges. When self-serving impulses motivate sexuality, sex itself falls into obscenity.

In the Satanic trinity, sex, reproduction, and corruption of the larger world are one in the same. Sin bursts from Satan’s head the moment his thoughts turn to “bold conspiracy against Heavens King,” such that her birth realizes corporeally Satan’s selfishness, his aspiration to assume a higher, unmerited po-

---

sition. Satan, seeing his “perfect image” in Sin falls into a narcissistic lust and takes joys “with [Sin] in secret,” conceiving a “growing burden” in her womb (2.764 – 76). When Satan violates his daughter, he acts in self-absorption, a literal desire to become full of himself, to sate his appetites with himself. Sin immediately follows the tale of her birth with the line “Meanwhile, War arose,” such that syntactically and metaphorically Sin equates this instance of paternal incest with an act of war (2.767). When Satan acts on his selfish sexuality, he begets only ruin. The war that arises as Satan impregnates Sin will cast him out of Heaven and the sex itself generates Death. The product of a self-serving union “[tears] through Sin’s entrails” and “[overtakes] his mother” … “in embraces forcible and foul,” giving rise to the canine monsters that torment Sin (2.783 – 93). Ostensibly, this new trinity serves as a perversion of the original, especially in the way that Sin’s birth matches The Son’s, but the added sexual dynamics herein speak to the way that selfishness becomes a corruptive force and contaminates sexual activity. Death’s offspring, though more wretched than their mother or father, establish the unstable vulnerability of sexual reproduction as well. Rape is obviously a self-serving action with no basis in love or mutual pleasure, and here rape traps Sin in a cycle of paradoxically destruc-

---

<https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton>
tive birth. The creatures come in successions; they emerge hourly to “gnaw / [Sin's] bowels,” return to her womb, and “[burst] forth / A fresh” (2.797 – 800). Selfish sex, in this family, holds the potential to deform the body and stain the larger world.

As with Satan and Sin’s tale, Adam and Eve’s life together begins with an immaculate birth. However, the Son sees it fit to create Eve because Adam longs for a companion who will provide him with “rational delights” rather than sensual ones, and because man cannot “converse” with animals (8.391, 96). The Oxford English Dictionary notes3 that the original sense of the word converse includes dwelling with and having intercourse with another, but Milton’s “Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce” asserts a difference between carnal and rational conversation. Namely, the rational conversant is “a ready and reviving” presence for his or her mate (1); in the words of Raphael, the love that grows out of rational conversation “refines / The thoughts, and heart enlarges” (8.589). So, instead of budding from a corrupted mind, the Son generates Eve from the pure body of a man who longs for a companion to better him as opposed to gratifying him. Once again, like Satan, Adam becomes enamored with the woman born of his flesh upon first sight, but Adam claims that his love for Eve

---

surpasses simply physical attraction. During his conversation with Raphael, Adam insists that he loves Eve for the graces of “all her words and actions mixt with love / And sweet compliance, which declare Unfeign’d / Union of Mind” (8.602 – 4). In this way, Adam’s love for Eve embodies Milton’s concept of “rational burning” (1). Milton asserts that though one might call what Adam feels ‘desire,’ it reveals itself to be something different, something sanctioned by God. Milton finds nothing unholy in burning for a companion in rational conversation, so Eve’s birth goes untainted, unlike Sin’s.

At the textual level, Milton suggests that once Adam has Eve in the sway of his “manly graces,” the two set about their work in the garden, which, at least in book four, they punctuate with sex (4.490). However carnal Milton’s suggestions are, though, he never intimates that the pair feels any sexual desire. Adam and Eve carry out their “connubial love” in “Rites Mysterious” that “God declares / pure” (4.744 – 46). In other words, before the Fall, sex fulfills God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply more than it satiates bodily impulses. After eating of the fruit, Adam and Eve find themselves beset not only by knowledge, but also by selfish desire. The quality of Adam and Eve’s fallen cravings makes itself apparent even before the two engage in any sexual activity. Both general ancestors eat the fruit “greedily,” becoming “intoxicated” “as with new wine” which indicates that the pair enjoys a kind of gluttonous physiological pleasure before their thoughts even move to sex (8.791, 1008). Of course, before long, the pair turns their “lascivious Eyes” onto each other and the first act of depravity begins (8.1014). Having fallen, Adam and Eve’s mutual burning ceases to be rational; “In lust they Burne” (8.1015). Adam makes superficial comments about Eve’s “beauty” and the way it “[enflames]” him, in a clear departure from his earlier dialogue with Raphael (8.1029, 31). Adam then asks Eve, “let us play” and in so doing defiles the act of sex by reducing what once fulfilled God’s commandment to idle play, meant only to please the senses (8.1027). In a dim echo of Satan’s self-absorbed reproduction, Adam and Eve’s sex produces a sort of disturbance. The pair slips into “a grosser sleep / bred of unkindly fumes, with conscious dreams” (8.1049 – 50). The word “bred” implies that Adam and Eve’s guilt-ridden nightmares are as much a product of their wanton sex as of their eating the fruit.
One might wonder, then, do self-serving urges motivate all sex after the fall? Milton might respond: “not necessarily.” Just as mankind will not remain fallen forever, sex and reproduction will not remain corrupted. God’s assertion that though man shall be “enthrall’d / by sin to foul exorbitant desires,” grace shall remain “Freely voutsait” in Him offers a kind of salvation (3.173 – 75). Falling does not negate the free will that God grants to Adam and Eve, so even having committed a great evil, Adam and Eve have the chance to turn back to God, and dedicate their lives outside of paradise to him. Of course, one sees this promise reiterated in the final moments of the tale when Michael assures Adam that Eve’s “seed” shall “all restore” (12.623). The notion that Adam and Eve’s progeny will restore the world redeems sex and reproduction, making them tools for God’s machinations once again.

In two scenes of sexual intercourse and reproduction, Milton allegorically represents and elaborates on claims from his “Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce.” In the two families that commit physical acts of sexual intercourse and reproduction, Milton shows that sex for the purpose of self-gratifying pleasure produces horrors. Satan’s ambition gives birth to Sin, with whom Satan copulates as a result of his own self-love, which in turn unleashes Death unto his mother and the world. Despite Adam and Eve’s virtuous births by the son, their thoughts fall with their souls into selfish depravity, leading the pair into shame and out of paradise. Only when one burns rationally for another can he or she engage in sexual intercourse with God’s blessing. Milton’s bold choice to depict sexual activity before the Fall plays into a larger corporeality that one finds throughout Paradise Lost. Milton, for example, often figures moments of spontaneous creation into terms of sexual reproduction and pregnancy. These generative moments in combination with suggestions of sex in Eden demonstrate that Milton eschews what will become traditional beliefs about the inherent sinfulness of the human body. That is not to say that Milton understands the human body as essentially good, either. Milton’s conception of sex and the larger human body both hinge on the idea of rational burning. Holiness, by Milton’s account, depends on the usage of the body and its functions rationally, and for the glorification of God.