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# Masculinity and Homoeroticism in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Whilst there is much to be said on the subject of masculinity in John Milton's writing and life, there is very little on the Englishman's regard for the homoerotic elements in his epic, *Paradise Lost*. Much is known about Milton's life, including his strong belief in the virtuousness of masculinity and the dominance of men. This stance seems to have had a profound impact on the power dynamic between his Adam and Eve, the accent on which is even stronger than what is found in *Genesis*. Indeed, "Hee for God only, shee for God in Him" (Milton Book IV, 299) is the epic poem's classic example of Milton's affinity for the superiority of Adam and men in general. Most intriguing about this misogyny is that it has made room in the text for certain homoerotic passages that, surprisingly, are not portrayed in a negative light in accordance with Christian doctrine. In fact, in Book VIII, there is even a positive connotation surrounding homosexual acts and relationships. Despite Milton's silence on the subject of sodomy, as with masculinity, aspects of the poet's life can be analyzed to understand the presence of these phenomena in his greatest work.

In many ways, Milton's views on sex and sexuality were exceptionally revolutionary for the day. With regard to the sexual act itself, Milton championed it as a sacred and glorious union, contrary to much of the more conservative and Puritan thinking of the seventeenth century. The most famous example of this in *Paradise Lost* is Satan's reaction to witnessing the pre-Fall lovemaking of Adam and Eve: "Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two / Imparadis't in one another's arms / ... shall enjoy their fill / Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust" (Milton Book IV, 505-508). In its pure and proper state, the physical union of man and woman is a beautiful, lust-free act, which is so hateful to the Devil that he is filled with envy and rage. The sight upsets him so that it causes him to bemoan his own fate, craving such divine intimacy. Returning to the life of the author, it should also be noted that he was rather progressive on the subject of divorce. After having left his first wife, Milton published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), wherein he provides a moral and Christian basis for divorce, which would (supposedly) be advantageous for both husband and wife. Milton was naturally criticized for the work, accused of being "the deviser of a new and pernicious paradox"

(Parker 244). Even though its purported purpose is egalitarian, Milton's approach to divorce is still heavily influenced by male dominance. Most notably, Milton had a near-violent response to the idea of women having the prerogative to separate: "Palpably uxorious! Who can be ignorant that woman was created for man, and not man for woman" (Turner 220). This statement manifests itself most famously in the aforementioned passage from Book IV of *Paradise Lost* (albeit with less rage). With the exception of this profound misogyny, Milton's stance on sex and divorce brings into question the possibility of a certain liberal worldview. Given his fondness for republicanism, this is worth considering.

Under the umbrella of masculinity, the subject of emasculation arguably, and ironically, receives the most attention in *Paradise Lost*. Specifically, Milton asserts that it was in fact Eve's emasculation of Adam which led to the Fall of Man. After having been punished by God for having eaten of the forbidden fruit, the archangel Michael flies down to Eden to share with Adam visions of the future, so that he may know that all is not lost. During the sequence, Adam comments, "But still I see the tenor of Man's woe / Holds on the same, from Woman to begin," to which Michael replies: "From Man's effeminate slackness it begins" (Milton Book XI, 632-634). The popular belief on the origin of sin, here put forth by Adam, is that it was Woman who brought death into the world, but Milton goes even further by suggesting that it was instead due to a lapse in Adam's masculinity. On the diction of "effeminate," editor Christopher Ricks notes the following connotation: "unmanly, with a suggestion of 'dominated by women.'" The notion of Adam being cuckolded into sinning is an interpretation which suggests that the domination of men by women is nothing short of cataclysmic; Turner goes into this in greater detail. Furthermore, the word "slackness" implies that Man's proper place is that of masculine leadership, in strong accord with Milton's beliefs. Adam's feminization would appear to be logical, as the Father of Mankind cries during his conversation with Michael: "Though not of Woman born; compassion quell'd / His best of Man, and gave him up to tears" (Milton Book XI, 496-497). Although it was the sight of the death of Abel that caused Adam to weep, Milton still uses the opportunity to emphasize the unmanly and feminine nature of being resigned to tears. This suggested weakness comes to be seemingly paradoxical in light of the homoerotic elements in the poem. Concerning the author, it would be too easy to say that his misogyny is merely a product of his time. One interesting point to consider is Milton's nickname during his time at Cambridge: "the Lady" (referring to his feminine frame), which he was rumored to have detested (Parker 43).

The curious link between masculinity and homosexuality occurs in Book X of *Paradise Lost*, after the Fall, the argument between Adam and Eve. During Adam's upbraiding rant on Eve's wickedness, Milton writes:

O why did God,  
 Creator wise, that peopl'd highest Heav'n  
 With Spirits Masculine, create at last  
 This novelty on Earth, this fair defect  
 Of Nature, and not fill the World at once  
 With Men as Angels without Feminine,  
 Or find some other way to generate  
 Mankind? (Book X, 888-895)

This is a striking passage. As with previous selections from the poem, Milton's misogyny is highly prominent, here shown by the condescending and sarcastic description of Eve as a "fair defect." The subsequent "Of Nature" takes the accusation even further, suggesting that the female sex is perhaps an abomination. (This could also be interpreted as an example of blasphemy in the text, as it implies that God made a mistake in the creation of Eve.) Furthermore, Adam's frustration with his female counterpart is particularly powerful given his indirect evocation to God, further emphasizing his confounded indignation. However, these sexist overtones should not mask the startling suggestion underneath. Adam's grievances with Eve have led him to have want of not only a world wherein women are not necessary for reproduction, but a world without women. While there is no concrete suggestion of homosexual intimacy, the juxtaposition of lines 894 and 895 with the preceding content begs the question of Adam's and Milton's thoughts on homosexuality. Is this perhaps a blasphemy, a refutation of the God-given human sexuality of male-female relations which Milton passionately celebrates?

While Milton's thoughts on homosexual acts are ambiguous, the standpoint of his Adam is far clearer. At the end of his conversation with the archangel Raphael, Adam innocently asks the celestial being if the angels engage in similar relations as he does with his wife: "Love not the heav'nly Spirits, and how their Love / Express they" (Book VIII, 615-616). Since there is no explicit communication to Adam that all the angels are male, it is evident that he (somehow) knows this to be fact given what he subsequently says to Eve in Book X. Consequently, the implication of this excerpt is fascinating.

Considering Adam was made perfect and ignorant of evil, his musings and meditations on homosexual intercourse among angels therefore cannot be sinful. (Bearing in mind the many logical flaws in the poem, it is entirely possible that this implication was in fact an accident.) This argument may be bold, but it is firmly supported by the response that Raphael gives. After blushing (which alone indicates there is intimacy among the angels), he answers Adam:

we enjoy  
 In eminence, and obstacle find none  
 Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars:  
 Easier than Air with Air, if Spirits embrace,  
 Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure (Book VIII, 623-627)

Although a certain degree of physical love is depicted by this section, the precise nature of the physicality is not definitive. The connotation of “eminence,” along with the ascribed purity of the contact, could refute the argument that this is a homoerotic image, as the diction suggests that the angels may be above the need for love-making in the sense of sex. However, the connotation of the word “Union” forcefully steers the argument in the direction of a queer theory reading, as the word is often used, particularly in a biblical setting, to refer to the joining and sexual relations of man and woman. Accordingly, the seemingly innocent portrait of the blending of bodiless forms is transformed into an eroticism bordering on ecstatic pleasure. Through the liberation from physical bodies, the angels are able to engage in the ultimate sexual union of complete and utter oneness of being. Should this form of love truly be “Pure,” it appears that Milton believes the union of the angels is even more glorious than that of man and woman.

The question of Milton and homosexuality is hazy and tricky. There is little research on the matter, yet there is some worthwhile biographical information to consider. For example, Milton deplored the actions of bishops who preyed on boys, finding it a gross feminization of the male sex and a theft of manhood. He felt that “true Liberty ‘consists in manly and honest labours, in sobriety and rigorous honour to the Marriage Bed, which in both Sexes should be bred up from chaste hopes to loyal Enjoyments’” (Turner 223). This quote fits in perfectly with Milton’s belief of women’s subordination to men (and his utter repugnance for the reverse) while championing the traditional conjugal and sexual union, with no attention given to what is found at the end of

Book XII of *Paradise Lost*. However, the above does not prove that Milton despised all homosexual behaviors, as the bishop-boy example is one of pedophilia and sexual assault. While this distinction may not have been relevant at the time, Milton's supposed frequenting of brothels does contradict his Puritan standpoint on the definition of "true Liberty." Whether this is true or not, criticisms of Milton's writing having "a deep personal knowledge and experience of illicit sex" (Turner 208) remain.

The resulting conclusion is an apparent paradox. Milton is undoubtedly a staunch proponent of traditional masculinity, yet he also seems to practice a certain acceptance of homosexual acts. The product is a misogynistic, pro-homosexual worldview, which is seldom found in contemporary sociology and seems absurd in the context of seventeenth-century England. It would be hard to make the case for Milton's liberalism (at least by modern standards), yet his attitudes on sex and its virtues, both heterosexual and homosexual, extend to what many Christians would label as sodomy. John Milton dares to paint homosexual relations as glorious, yet the absence of biographical information on Milton with regards to homoeroticism seems to have convinced Miltonists that these prominent elements in the text are not worth analyzing further. By ignoring these aspects of the poem, it seems perfectly reasonable that Milton would have rejected homosexuality given his belief in the sacredness of traditional marriage. Regardless, these elements remain, and as they are almost certainly not an accident, the derived image of Milton is as perplexing as it is intriguing. ■

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