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A Queer Poet in a Queer Time: John Milton and Homosexuality

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John Milton: Poetry and Selected Prose

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<div style="text-align: center;">A Queer Poet in a Queer Time: John Milton and Homosexuality</div>

Following the brave leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and the widespread influence of feminism, the English-speaking world is now in the era of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights movement, a critical time in world history. Although it seems like gay rights advocacy only began in the last few decades, people have been fighting for the rights and liberties of homosexual people throughout American and British history. Accordingly, the twenty-first century is not the only culture to have a prevalence of LGBT people; past societies have all had their share of homosexual individuals. However, because homosexuality has only very recently gained general support, past English cultures treated LGBT people with prejudice and disdain. John Milton's culture was such an environment: during the English Renaissance and early modern period in England, citizens publicly decried homosexuality and those who participated in it. Although the public stance was hatred and discrimination, internal movements became to expand their thinking on sexuality. Since Milton was one of the most critical thinkers of his time, this situation poses a question: how did Milton view homosexuality? David Hawkes refers to Milton as "A Hero of Our Time;" so, how would Milton's ideology view homosexuality in the year 2014?

Homosexuality is a loaded term, especially in 2014: from gay marriage to sexual orientations, homosexuality encompasses many complex topics. How one views homosexuality as a concept is critical to how one interprets history through a homoerotic lens. In queer theory,

there are two major approaches to homosexuality in Western history. The essentialist model states that homosexual identity is a fixed concept that has remained unchanged and understandable throughout different cultures, times, and geographic locations. In contrast, the social-constructionist model states that throughout different cultures, times, and geographic locations, homosexual identity has expressed itself in varying fashions (Loughlin 2).

Marie Helene Loughlin claims that early queer critics of English history followed the essentialist model. However, Alan Bray, the first and foremost scholar to begin researching homosexuality in English history, seems to discredit Loughlin's claim. In his book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England,* the foundational text for queer English study, he writes, "the terms in which we now speak of homosexuality cannot readily be translated into those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries […] We need to carry our preconceptions lightly if we are to see in Renaissance England more than the distorted image of ourselves" (Bray 17). Bray recognizes that the categories into which contemporary culture separates homosexuality do not accurately reflect how past societies perceived the topic. For the sake of his study, Bray's solution is to use the term homosexuality in a strictly physical sense. Scholar Kenneth Borris also takes this view and labels it "the acts paradigm," which sees sexual identities and sexual actions as not equivalent; therefore, historicists perceive them differently than twenty-first century scholars do (Borris 4). Because Milton's society viewed homosexuality differently than contemporary thinkers do, Milton's ideology interprets modern homosexuality in distinct categories. Seventeenth century historical context, Milton's life and works, and scholarship combine to inform a complex Miltonic commentary on twenty-first century homosexuality. Although Milton condemned homosexual acts as sin and indicated no sexual attraction toward males, his ideology leaves room for the support of gay marriage.

Similar to the majority of world history, most Englanders during Milton's age perceived homosexual acts as perverse and evil. Loughlin writes, "Sodomy constitutes the single most prevalent early modern discourse concerning male same-sex sexual acts" (2). In the Renaissance and early modern period, sodomy was a term derived from the city of Sodom in Genesis 19, which God destroyed with fire and brimstone because of their sexual perversions. Sodomy referred to homosexual sex but not solely; it also implied heterosexual adultery, bestiality, or pedophilia (Bray 14, Borris 95). English society labeled someone who committed such acts with vulgar names like "ganymede, pathic, cinaedus, catamite, bugger, ingle, sodomite" (Bray 13). Specifically, Englanders believed that sodomy only constituted penetration, not the emission of semen. For many citizens, the immorality of sodomy surpassed rape, kidnap, burglary, arson, and mutilation (Borris 94). Similar to recent decades, many people feared and reviled those who participated in homosexual actions.

In its extreme, sodomy was a legitimate crime in Renaissance and early modern England, a felony punishable by death. Sir Edward Coke, Elizabethan politician and judge, recorded many court hearings about those with sodomy charges. In a specific 1614 case, one man had sexual relations with a 16-year old boy, which Coke claimed was "in a manner diabolical, felonious, and contrary to nature" (Coke 95). Coke believed the man committed the "detestable and abominable sin of sodomy […] to the great displeasure of almighty God, and to the dishonor of the whole human race" (96). In addition, sodomy was the sin "not to be named amongst Christians" (96). King Henry VIII originally ruled that sodomy was a felony without benefit of Clergy, and the punishment was "to be hanged by the neck till he be dead" (97). Although Queen Mary I revoked her father's law, Elizabeth I reestablished the order during her reign.

Despite the public outcry against homosexual acts, a reticent movement that supported same-sex acts began to form. Borris writes, "As at present, attitudes ranged from rabid condemnations through disgust and scorn to neutrality, sympathy, acceptance, delighted indulgence, and enthusiastic advocacy, all in complex social interplay" (Borris 1). While the adverse views toward homosexuality were prevalent and oppressive, positive attitudes toward same-sex acts did indeed exist. Scholars speculate that the underground homosexual community of England interacted in "ambiguous formulations" that allowed them to fulfill their desires without exposure to the public law. These methods included flirtatious glancing, hand gestures, and selective language that implied secret homoerotic speech (10). Queer critics conclude that the main way homosexual people expressed their desires was through writing. Specifically, poems and personal letters were genres that writers found room in which to construct their own homoerotic space.

Milton believed that sodomy was a sin and social evil. Growing up in a religious home, Milton was a second generation Protestant Christian who during his youth desired to be a clergyman. Assuming his place in the upper class, his education at St. Paul's Cathedral and Christ's College at Cambridge, and his Protestant faith, Milton considered sodomy a sin. In Milton's theological treatise "The Christian Doctrine," he defines the virtue of chastity. Since chastity "consists in temperance as regards the unlawful lusts of the flesh," Milton explains "To chastity are opposed all kinds of impurity; effeminacy, sodomy, bestiality, &c. which are offences against ourselves in the first instance, and tending to our own especial injury" (Milton 1015). Following traditional Christian doctrine that homosexuality is a sin committed in uncontrolled lust, Milton publically believed that sodomy was immoral. However, because he

was a writer, scholars speculate that perhaps Milton himself used his beloved English language to express his latent homosexual desires.

To know if Milton was indeed homosexual, one must distinguish the twenty-first century understanding of sexual orientations from past sexual identities. In today's culture, psychologists define sexual orientation as the innate predisposition to be sexually, emotionally, and romantically attracted to the same, opposite, or both genders. However, this definition has only entered the forefront of American academia in recent decades. This is where Borris' acts paradigm comes into play: did people in Renaissance and early modern England separate sexual acts and identities, or did they have an immature understanding of sexual orientation? Scholar David M. Halperin argues that "sexual acts and identities in European culture were not strictly separate prior to the nineteenth century" (Borris 5). Loughlin emphasizes that the separation of sexual acts and identities in early modern England "does not mean that early modern individuals had no notion of an identity informed, shaped, and perhaps even made distinct by a person's particular sexual desires and acts" (Loughlin 5). While early English culture did not have a complete understanding of sexual orientation like it does today, there was an understanding of sexual attraction and identity in Milton's society.

So what were these early understandings of sexual identity? Halperin divides them up into five main categories: "male effeminacy, pederasty or 'active' sodomy, male friendship love, passivity, and homosexuality" (Borris 6). Male effeminacy implied a female-like man who did not necessarily have sex with males; passivity was very similar, but it existed only in male-male relationships. "Active" sodomy involved penetration of a submissive partner, and homosexuality eventually led to a modern understanding of sexual orientation. Friendship and male love, in

contrast with the other four categories, was the most prominent avenue for intimacy between males during the English Renaissance.

The English Renaissance was a time of rebirth for English culture, harkening back to the Greek and Roman ancients. In regards to male-male relationships, antiquity idolized love between males, elevating it over heterosexual love (Borris 251). Borris organizes these ancient accounts of male-male relationships into three interconnected categories: "discourses on friendship; Platonic dialogues on love; and comparative evaluations of opposite-sex and male same-sex loves" (251). Ethical essays and texts on friendship, particularly by Aristotle, idealize male friendship and its wisdom and intimacy. Due to this, there is room for romanticized and homoeroticized interpretations of ancient male-male relationships. In Greek and Roman culture, there was also philosophical talk on which love was higher: male-female or male-male relationships; modern day interpretations of this also leave room for many straight or queer theories.

In contrast, Platonic dialogues on love were prevalent in antiquity and one of the overriding narratives for the English Renaissance. Plato defined love as the desire for beauty; because of this, he analyzes male-male relationships "much more amorously in an ambience of startling homoeroticism" (Borris 252). Plato's dialogues constitute younger and older males, depicting the youths as handsome lovers. Despite this implied homoeroticism, Plato's philosophy devalued the body; he believed male lovers should refrain from physical, sexual pleasures, despite their intense desires, in order to purify their chaste souls (252). While queer theorists still interpret Platonic relationships in a homoerotic way, research shows that, despite its emotional intimacy, Plato's ideology on male relationships does not correlate with a homosexual identity.

The English Renaissance applied Platonic love theory to both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships, retaining a sense of homoeroticism. Marsilio Ficino, an Italian philosopher who lived during the English Renaissance, composed one of the most influential Renaissance essays about relationships: "De amore," or, "On Love." Ficino's essay does not interpret Platonic love theory but applies its philosophy to Renaissance relationships. Believing Plato's theory that love is the desire for beauty, Ficino assumes that the male body is the epitome of physical beauty and the goal of all human desire (Borris 261). In chapter eight of "On Love," Ficino argues that when two men share a friendship, they exchange themselves with one another; "each gives himself to the other in order to receive the other" (Ficino 263). Thus, both men possess both himself and the other, producing the goal of reciprocal love. Ficino writes, "I recover myself, lost by myself through my own negligence, in you, preserving me. You do the same in me" (263). While Ficino indeed stresses intimacy between two males, "On Love" also prohibits any sexual activity outside of a man and woman. If anyone desires sex "against the order of nature with men" or with a woman besides the purpose of procreation, "he certainly abuses the dignity of love" (263). Furthermore, "the purpose of erections […] is not the useless act of ejaculation, but the function of fertilizing and procreating" (268). Ficino's Renaissance love theory, representative of the rebirth of Platonic love beliefs, emphasizes male intimacy while simultaneously rejecting homosexual acts and identities.

So did Milton, understanding his culture's views on sexual identity and male friendship, have a homosexual orientation? The basis for this interpretation of Milton's personal life comes from his close friendship with Charles Diodati. Attending school together at St. Paul's Cathedral while they were young, Diodati and Milton formed a close relationship both intellectually and emotionally. In the early modern period, friendships were typically between people of the same

social class, so it was ordinary for Milton and Diodati, who came from similar backgrounds, to unite so closely in friendship (Brown 75). The two students wrote to each other in Latin elegies, practiced their language skills together, and shared good times with one another. Even after Milton left St. Paul's to attend Cambridge, he kept up correspondence with Diodati until the latter's unfortunate, early death in 1638. John P. Rumrich contends that Milton's relationship with Diodati affected the rest of his life, including his literary texts. William R. Parker goes even further and believes that Diodati's presence in Milton's life affected his life vocation, influencing "to some unknown extent" Milton's decision not to become a clergyman (Rumrich 130). Throughout their childhood friendship and into their adult intimacy, Diodati's friendship profoundly changed Milton; scholars Masson and Sax write, "Milton clearly adored [Diodati] more than he ever adored any human being except possibly his second wife" (Rumrich 130). Diodati not only had an effect on Milton's literary life and works, but also his personal life and, therefore, his sexual identity.

Scholarly discussion about Diodati's psychological influence on Milton has entered the queer theory realm; many critics argue that Milton and Diodati had homoerotic feelings toward one another. One must keep in mind the cultural aspects of male-male friendship in the English Renaissance and early modern period; intimate and erotic language was normal under the "Renaissance codes of ideal male friendship" (Brown 74). Rumrich writes about contemporary readers, "in an age compulsively preoccupied with sexuality—not just sex—we cannot help but ask […]: what relation does their love for one another bear to what our culture means by homosexuality?" (Rumrich 130). Milton's and Diodati's intimate relationship and erotic language was not homosexual, but simply the normal communication style for English Renaissance Platonic male friends.

Some scholars see room in Milton's writing for homoerotic expression. Like those that

kept their sexuality a secret but used writing as a homosexual space in the Renaissance, critics

claim that Milton's letters and poems subtly reveal his homosexual inclinations. In the early

modern period of England, letters were a suspected way of expressing homoerotic desires.

Loughlin writes that letters "often imply an intimacy and capacity for conveying desire, which

perhaps increase in intensity of expression precisely because they are predicated on the absence

of the beloved (Loughlin 101). Furthermore, scholars like Stephen Gun-Bray argue that pastoral

poetry, like Milton's *Epitaphium Damonis*, intentionally leaves room for homoerotic discourse.

In his book arguing this thesis, Gun-Bray writes, "The ability of pastoral poetry to recreate both a

bygone place and a bygone time allows for the creation of what I call homoerotic space: a safe,

because carefully demarcated, zone in which homoeroticism can appear" (Gun-Bray 15). More

than any other kind of poetry, pastorals lend themselves to discuss love between young men,

who were usually fictional shepherds. The sexual expression, religious, and political points

frequented in pastoral poetry made it the ideal genre for early English poets to hide

homosexuality within. Gun-Bray states that this kind of "spatialization of sexuality" was a

classic way for talking about sexuality, including homoeroticism. However, Milton's letters and

pastoral poem proves that he only loved Diodati in a Platonic way.

Elegy 1, which Milton wrote to Diodati while he was studying at Christ's College,

Cambridge University, is largely in praise of the beauty of girls. At the beginning of the letter,

Milton does offer Diodati an intimate compliment: "Trust me, my joy is great that thou shouldst

be, / Though born of foreign race, yet born for me […] my sprightly friend" (Milton l. 5-7).

Despite these seemingly erotic lines, Milton spends a large portion of the elegy praising women.

While he admits he does not fully enjoy studying at Cambridge, Milton writes, "Here many a

virgin troop I may descry, / Like stars of mildest influence, gliding by, / Oh forms divine!" (l. 54-56). Milton "oft [...] gazed on gem-surpassing eyes" and commented on the women's hair: "Bright locks, Love's golden snares" (l. 58, 62). Women's "seductive cheeks," "necks whiter than the arms of lively Pelops," and the "exceptional beauty of the foreheard" also arouse Milton (l. 60-61, 63-60). Despite an emotional intimacy with Diodati, Milton clearly takes physical pleasure in the sight of women; as scholar Edward LeComte says, "to take its opening compliments to the addressee as a sexual revelation is not much better than assuming that a letter beginning 'Dear Sir' must be a love letter" (LeComte 6).

Accordingly, Milton's Elegy 6 also shows emotional, Platonic intimacy with Diodati alongside of Milton's emphasis on physical chastity. In the first paragraph of his letter to his companion, Milton writes, "how fond I am of you [...] for our love cannot fit into short modes, nor does it walk perfectly in these lame feet of poetry" (Milton 1). Milton's deep affection for Diodati is not erotic but purely straight, Platonic male friendship; such erotic language was normal between males in their culture. Later on in the letter, Milton stresses the importance of chastity for young men: "his youth should be crime-free and chaste, his ways must be upright, and his hand without blemish" (Milton 2). Just like Plato, Milton stresses the virtue of chastity, a theme that traces all of his literary works.

Milton's most famous writing about Diodati, the melancholy pastoral epistle *Epitaphium Damonis*, is perhaps the one text that shows the depth of love Milton had for Diodati, which makes scholars question Milton's sexual identity. After Diodati passed away in 1638, Milton heard the news while traveling overseas and wrote *Epitaphium Damonis* in Latin to grieve the loss of his companion. In the pastoral elegy, Thyrsis, a shepherd, learns about the death of his fellow shepherd Damon; the shepherd characters are obvious stand-ins for Milton and Diodati. In

mourning his friend's death, Thyrsis cries, "But what will become of me; what faithful friend will stay close by my side as you were […] Who will lull my day to rest with talk and song? […] To whom may I entrust my heart? (Milton 2). Thyrsis does not believe that any other human companion will be able to comfort and love him as much as Damon, even implying that Damon slept with Thyrsis each night. Despite this seemingly erotic intimacy, Thyrsis also praises Damon's chastity and purity: "Damon dwells in the purity of heaven, for he himself is pure" (3). Thyrsis, who at this point in the elegy renames Damon as Diodati, officially sealing Milton's obvious reference, knows that Damon is enjoying blessings in heaven despite his death. Crying out to Damon himself, Thyrsis says, "because you never tasted the pleasure of marriage, lo! For you are reserved a virgin's honours" (3). If the reader takes Milton's lines at face value, this text shows that Diodati was a virgin who never experienced sexual intimacy. Milton admires his friend all the more because Diodati remained pure in Milton's ideal of chastity.

Evidenced throughout his major written works to Diodati, Milton was not latently homosexual nor did he harbor homoerotic feelings toward his close companion. Rumrich writes, "Milton's intimacy with Diodati revolved around a Platonically inspired pursuit of intellectual and ethical clarity;" because of their strong connection, Milton seems to have desired intellectual companionship for the rest of his life, something he found lacking in his marriage with Mary Powell (Rumrich 133). Milton pursued knowledge and beauty in life and truly found it with Didoati. In one of his Latin letters to his friend, Milton writes, "I cannot help loving people like you. For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: He has instilled in me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful" (134). Twenty-first century thinkers tend to view love and eroticism through a Freudian lens instead of a Platonic one (130).

However, Milton viewed his own sexual identity with a Platonic Eros, and his written texts show that he had no homoerotic attraction toward Diodati.

Milton and Diodati's Platonic friendship is similar to the twenty-first century concept of a bromance. Elizabeth J. Chen, in her scholarly essay about the bromance, defines it as "a form of friendship that channels intimate male friendship into narrow and well-defined boundaries" (Chen 242). In popular culture, a bromance is simply a strong friendship between two straight males, since society considers male friendship "deep and lasting" while female friendship is "fleeting and emotional" (243). The twenty-first century bromance is a historic parallel to past idealizations of male friendship, like Plato's and Aristotle's theories. Like ancient male friendships, the intimacy of bromances "slips between the boundaries of sexual and non-sexual relationships" (248). Chen argues that bromances reinforce male hierarchy and homophobia because they value straight, heterosexual males over a male-female marriage and over friendship between gay males. Because bromances "provide a space for intimate male friendship," Chen believes they parody marriage and even surpass it, all while favoring masculinity and heteronormativity (259, 252). Similar to how Milton valued his friendship with Diodati over his marriage with Mary Powell, a man in a bromance can become attached to their intimate male friend more than their wife. Bromances of twenty-first century popular culture shows that history's tendency to favor male-male, non-sexual, intimate relationships continue through 2014.

Homosexuality in the twenty-first century does not just consist of physical sex and sexual orientation; gay marriage is the most public, political, and widespread aspect of homosexuality in the 2010s. Currently legal in 35 of the United States, gay marriage advocates fight for government recognition of marriage between two of the same genders, including immigration, social security, tax, and other social benefits. When the Netherlands became the first country in

the world history to legalize gay marriage in 2000, the LGBT rights movement launched into the political sphere. Massachusetts became the first U.S. state to legalize gay marriage in 2004, and the number of accepting states has increasingly grown since. Legal same-sex unions are a revolutionary concept for world history that has only recently gained support. Although gay marriage was an unheard of concept in Renaissance and early modern England, ideologies of marriage was undergoing a revolutionary change during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of the foremost progressive thinkers was Milton, who publically argued for the Biblical support of divorce. Translated into the twenty-first century, Milton's radical beliefs on marriage leave room for the support of gay marriage legalization.

From the English Reformation to the Enlightenment, the concept of marriage evolved from a covenantal to a contractual model. Sharon Achinstein researches and tracks this change in her article, "Saints or Citizens? Ideas of Marriage in Seventeenth-Century English Republicanism." Scholar John Witte has uncovered around five models for marriage during the seventeenth century. First came the Catholic-sacramental model that believed marriage was a church sacrament; out of this rebelled three Protestant versions: the Lutheran model, where the law governed marriage; the Calvinist model, in which marriage was safeguarded by the community; and the Anglican model, which combined the previous three models. Finally, there was the Enlightenment contractual model, where marriage was solely a government document (Achinstein 241-242). The evolution of marriage "from sacrament to contract" had a huge influence on English thinkers and their beliefs on marriage (242).

During his passionless and frustrating marriage with Mary Powell, Milton published the treatise *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1643, arguing from a theological viewpoint for the legalization of divorce. Caught in "a drooping and disconsolate household captivity" with

Powell, Milton argued from the laws of Moses and Jesus' teaching that divorce was acceptable if there was a lack of psychological compatibility between husband and wife (Milton 703). Milton founded his divorce principles in his ideas about government. A man has the same right to divorce as people have the right to change the government: "He who marries intends as little to conspire his own ruine, as he that swears Allegiance: and as a whole people is in proportion to an ill Government, so is one man to an ill marriage" (Hawkes 149). Remarkably progressive for his age, Milton thus believed that "the most rational partner in the marriage should be dominant," regardless of gender (Hawkes 151). Scholar David Hawkes concludes that Milton's divorce tracts "argue that sexuality should be regulated by the conscience, not by the law" (148). In Milton's Protestant faith, marriage was between God and man; therefore, he concluded, "no law or covenant 'should bind against a prime and principall scope of its institution, and of both or either party cov'nanting" (Achinstein 257). Since marriage was a divine ordination, the government should not interfere between the union of two people.

Milton's ideology supports gay marriage in three realms: politics, the goal of marriage, and gender roles. Politically, Milton's views of marriage rested on his strong belief in individual liberties. Ben LaBreche writes, "both his pamphlets on 'the nature of marriage' and his writing on 'freedom to express oneself' participated in a single, coordinated effort to promote 'domestic or private liberty'" (LaBreche 971). Just like a government should be an institution ruled by the people, Milton thought marriage should also be a free space that protects individual liberty. Michael Komorowski believes that Milton's strong support for individual agency called for "the constant evaluation of social relationships" and a "contractual bond," similar to the ownership of private property (Komorowski 69-70). Gay marriage grants liberty for all people, whether they have a gay or straight sexual orientation. Under Komorowski's thinking, Milton's emphasis on

freedom should allow gay people the contractual right to marry; new social relationships like

same-sex unions need Miltonic evaluation.

Additionally, Milton's support of divorce gives leeway for the legality of same-sex

unions. Milton's divorce tract *Tetrachordon* states that the "natural law guarantees everyone the

right to determine how best to live according to God's standards" (73). However, marriage

eschews natural law if an evil spouse leads their partner away from virtue and godliness. Milton

thus believed that marriage must be "not a natural, but a civill and ordain'd relation" (73).

Therefore, because marriage was like a contract of property ownership, a couple could dissolve it

through divorce. The individual, legal right of divorce added a new dimension of freedom in

marriage that the English world had previously never possessed. Despite Milton's view of same-

sex actions, his principles demanded that he give everyone the right to think and act according to

their conscience, modern day gay people included. By supporting divorce, Milton brought

marriage down to a contractual level, allowing people the freedom of separation if their union

did not glorify God. This loose, contractual freedom of marriage must include today's

contemporary idea of same-sex unions. In Miltonic thinking, if marriage is a civil institution

accessible and dissolvable for all, gay people deserve that right as well.

Milton's ideal goal of marriage also factors into the support of gay marriage.

Komorowski writes, "Marriage was best understood as an "outward good," a means to

companionship and communal holiness" (69). Every marriage should strive for virtue and

discourse, Milton believed: "'conversation rather than procreation or material help represents

'the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage'" (LaBreche 971). Since procreation is not the

essential end to marriage, a union between a man and woman is no longer as critical. If Milton

believed Hawkes' interpretation that "sex without love is emotional slavery" (Hawkes 156), and

therefore sex is not the goal of marriage, then there must be an "intellectual attraction" between spouses (LaBreche 974). This is where the modern day concept of sexual orientation enters: intellectual attraction occurs between members of the same gender for gay and lesbian people; that kind of attractiveness depends on one's sexual predisposition. If such attraction and righteousness did not exist in a marriage, Milton believed the couple was not fulfilling the true calling of marriage; thus, they should divorce. Sexual orientation and psychological compatibility coincide: one is needed for the other to exist. Milton would not approve of a gay man marrying a straight woman in the name of righteousness if they were not internally united. True righteousness in marriage for Milton involved mentally compatible and virtuous people striving toward God's glory; gay people are capable of this in same-sex unions. As long as the couple glorified God through reason and virtue, Milton's goal of marriage allows for the support of gay marriage.

Finally, Milton's view of gender roles in marriage contribute to the Miltonic endorsement of same-sex unions. Despite Milton's cultural misogyny, he was surprisingly progressive in his views of marriage gender roles. LaBreche argues that Milton's "very different views of gender and marriage converge in support of a single claim for the authority of free discourse and government" (972). Milton's goal of marriage as virtuous conversation leaves room for egalitarian marriage; the most rational partner is dominant, regardless of gender, but husband and wife should be intellectually engaged and equal. Or, as LaBreche puts it, "conjugal discourse with rational equality" (973). Like Milton's downplay of procreation, his gender roles actually minimize gender in marriage. Because of this, Milton's divorce tracts feature gender-less distinctions, instead embracing all of humanity; Milton's pamphlets "discuss the rights and liberties of marriage and divorce in the gender-neutral language of 'humanity' […] where they

defend 'human dignity' and the 'human shape' or where they argue from 'the principles of humanity' (976). Gay marriage applies to Milton's undervaluing of gender because the specific maleness or femaleness of a marriage does not matter; for Milton, noble discourse is the essential aspect of marriage. Miltonic philosophy upholds gay marriage in spite of gender. LaBreche concludes that Milton forwent sexual hierarchy in his divorce tracts to point to the larger principle at hand; "Miltonic marriage tends to efface sexual difference" (972). Gender and sexual variance does not matter to Milton in marriage; it was the goal of virtuous conversation, unencumbered by marriage contracts, which Milton was ultimately fighting for. Accordingly, his ideology provides room for gay marriage if the couple glorified God through righteousness.

Although old ideas do not translate perfectly into contemporary issues, there is much to learn about twenty-first century homosexuality from Renaissance and early modern England homosexuality. Sexuality has undergone a vast evolution throughout English history, from being an unspeakable crime punishable by death to a celebrated, legal institution. There are lessons to learn from old English sexuality: predispositions in people will always manifest themselves throughout time, prejudice and oppression of people groups strengthens their solidarity, and sexuality has and always will be a critical part to human life. Milton had an extreme influence on poetry, literature, theology, politics, and thinking in his day, and his wisdom continues to envelop current ideology. It is the duty of twenty-first century scholars to learn from the past and apply it to the present in all social issues.

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