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

Adam J. Wagner
“A Hero of Our Time”

- How does Miltonic ideology influence a 21st century understanding of homosexuality?
- Homosexuality = same-sex sexual acts, sexual orientation, and gay marriage
“Sodomy” and Sex

- Felony punishable by death (such laws existed until 1967)
- “To chastity are opposed all kind of impurity; effeminacy, sodomy, bestiality, &c. which are offences against ourselves in the first instance, and tending to our own especial injury”
Sexual Orientation in the Past?

**The Essentialist Model**
- Homosexual identity is fixed and remains unchanged and understandable throughout history
- Marie Helene Loughlin

**The Social-Constructionist Model**
- Homosexual identity expresses itself in varying fashions throughout different historical periods
- Alan Bray
- Kenneth Borris’ “the acts paradigm”

Either way, there was an understanding of sexual attraction and identities.
Platonic Love Theory

- Love is the desire for beauty
- Devalued the body; refrain from physical/sexual pleasures
- The English Renaissance emphasized male-male emotional intimacy without sexual attraction
- The Renaissance operated under a Platonic lens; 21st Century under a Freudian lens
Milton and Charles Diodati

- Close friends, adored each other

- Intimate relationship and erotic language was normal under Renaissance codes of ideal male friendship

- Elegy 1, Elegy 6, Epitaphium Damonis

- Similar to 21st Century concept of a “bromance”
Milton and Marriage

- The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, 1643

- Divorce is acceptable if there was a lack of psychological compatibility between husband and wife

- Milton’s political and theological views of marriage leave room for the legalization of gay marriage
Miltonic Gay Marriage

- Government should not interfere between the union of two people
- Goal of marriage is not sex/reproduction, but intellectual attraction
- Compatible, virtuous people striving together for righteousness
- Despite Milton’s cultural misogyny, his ideas are egalitarian
- De-emphasis on gender; most rational partner is dominant
Discussion