

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



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# "A Hero of Our Time"

- How does Miltonic ideology influence a 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Platonic lens; 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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