
Transgression of Heteronormativity in Paradise Lost: A Queer Study

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Abstract:

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, despite its all-pervasive biblical content, has very explicit elements of queer transgression. Even in such a text with a misogynistic bias, there is a strong undercurrent of queer and feminist readings. The language Milton uses, the portrayal of characters, and the depiction of scenes of reproduction speak of the queer contents consistently present in the text. The landscapes described in the course of the epic, Chaos and Hell, and again, the queer and masculine character of reproduction, such as Sin being born out of Satan's head and Eve being born from Adam's rib speak of the transgression of heteronormativity in Milton's text.

Sin becomes the victim of reproduction and sexual violence, quite in contrast with her queer birth, and thereby illustrates the epic's problematic perspective towards women. Satan's action not only challenges the authority of God but it also transgresses sexual and reproductive normativity. Sin and Satan, traditionally heralding the hetero-patriarchal norms of the universe, are queer characters and depict the discursive nature of queerness in the text. Eve is produced from the body of Adam as per the desire of God. Again, in Book VIII Raphael refers to love and sex among the angels as genderless, and free from any restraint or obstacle. The angels transgress gender binaries through their homoerotic love and sex.

All these challenge our heteronormative conventions and practices, and speak of gender perspectives usually ignored in traditional criticism of Milton.

Keywords: Gender Studies; Homoeroticism; Subversion; Reproductivity

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, despite its all-pervasive biblical content, has very explicit elements of queer transgression. The text is a product of the androcentric culture of the Puritan England. However, even in such a text with the misogynistic bias of the time, there is a strong undercurrent of queer readings. The language Milton uses, the portrayal of characters, and the depiction of scenes of reproduction speak of the queer contents consistently present in the text. The landscapes described in the course of the epic, the way Hell and Chaos are described, and the queered and androcentric nature of reproduction, like Sin created from Satan's head or Eve created from Adam's ribs, speak of the transgression of heteronormativity in Milton's text.

Queer theory as a distinct branch of gender studies emerged out of gay/lesbian studies around 1991. Gay/lesbian studies throw a challenge to the conventional form of normative sexualities and try to find out the binaries between the normal and the queer and also explore the social, cultural, and power dynamics behind them. However, gay/lesbian studies had its focus mainly on the issues of homosexuality, whereas queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Queer theory makes a study of all normative and deviant sexual orientation and activities. Queer theory concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are odd or abnormal in this sense -- and then, by extension, with the normative behaviours and identities which define what is "queer". Thus, queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviours, including those which are gender-specific as well as those which involve "queer" non-normative forms of sexuality. Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviours, all concepts of sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs, sets of signifiers which reflect the dynamics of power. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that sexuality is a biological determinant or an essentialist feature, something determined by the divinity or judged by some eternal standards of morality and truth.

In its evolution the term 'queer' has come to be used not only as a signifier to the sexual orientation of the person concerned, but has also become a political ideal. Queer is, as stated by LGBTQA Center, Wright State University, "A political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. The term is a simple label to explain a complex set of sexual behaviours and desires" ("Terminology"). Queerness, in the opinion of Judith Butler, is not just a semiotic but a social phenomenon as well. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) assumes, as Virginia Woolf did in her book *Orlando* (1928) that gender is not a fixed entity or identity but a product of social dynamics. Simone de Beauvoir and the subsequent feminist theorists remarked that

gender is a social construct whereas sex is a biological construct, but Judith Butler goes beyond these postulations and remarks that not only gender but also sex is socially and culturally constructed, nothing coming down as essentially true or divinely programmed:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler, 1990, 7)

Butler says in another context:

We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time [...]" (Judith Butler, "Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender")

Sex and gender are thus linked up with the expectations of the society, nothing pre-determined. There is no universal or fixed set of features that can really form one's masculine or feminine identity.

Now, in *Paradise Lost* Milton rejects the normative sexual behaviour or sexual identity in several respects. The way Milton uses language, depicts characters, and describes scenes of reproduction makes it clear that knowingly or unknowingly he creates a queer space in his epic. Normative thinking is challenged in respect of gender representation and depiction of sexuality and reproduction.

Milton wrote his magnum opus at a time when the strictly patriarchal structure of Puritan England did not approve of any subversion of its heteronormative sexual practices and in that sense his epic challenges the stereotypes. Adam J. Wagner observes, ". . . 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" (3). The English people believed that the immorality involved in sodomy even surpassed all other crimes, as Kenneth Borris says: "sodomy outranks rape, kidnapping a woman, felonious mutilation, burglary, and arson" (89). Nevertheless, Wagner observes, "While the adverse views toward homosexuality were prevalent and oppressive, positive attitudes toward same-sex acts did indeed exist" (4). Marlowe's plays like *Edward the Second*, in Shakespeare's plays like *Hamlet*, *As You Like It* or *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream contain homoerotic sensibility. These instances prove that homoeroticism was not alien to the Renaissance England.

During the Renaissance in England there was a resurgence of the ancient Greek and Roman culture. The ancient Greeks celebrated all-male relationships, even the homoerotic ones. Thus, Homer's Achilles loves Patroclus, Socrates gives license to homoeroticism as an entertainment in the proposed Academy, and his disciples including Plato celebrate their bachelorship and homoerotic attachment. Plato in his discourses involves only the males, and portrays his young men as handsome, potential homosexual lovers.

The Renaissance writers in England revived the Platonic philosophy and thereby retained to a great deal the homoeroticism as suggested in the dialogues. The 15th century Italian Platonist Marsilio Ficino in his essay "De amore" ("On Love") combines Platonism with Renaissance ideas on relationship. In Ficino's assumption the body of a man is the very epitome of beauty and desire. Now the question is – "Did Milton who was a renowned scholar in classical studies display his homoerotic desire in his writings, being influenced by Plato's dialogues?" Milton definitely had very intimate attachment with his friend, Charles Diodati. The two attended St. Paul's Cathedral and developed a very strong intellectual and emotional bonding. They wrote Latin elegies to each other and experimented with their skills in classical languages and passed a very good time together. Later Milton left St. Paul's Cathedral and attended Cambridge but had contact with him all the while till the death of Diodati. The scholars like John P. Rumrich and William R. Parker believe that Diodati even influenced Milton in not accepting the vocation of a clergyman. It was not just restricted within the intellectual level, rather went beyond that and determined his sexual outlook. Milton was not happy that the Latin elegy "Elegia Sexta" could not express the intensity of his attachment:

Carmine scire velis quâ te redaméque
colámque,

Crede mihi vix hoc carmine scire queas.

Nam neque noster amor modulis includitur artis,

Nec venit ad claudos integer ipse pedes. ("Elegia Sexta" 5-8)

[If you wanted to know by song how I return your love and how fond I am of you, believe me you would search in vain to find out by this song, for our love cannot fit into short modes, nor does it walk perfectly in these lame feet of poetry.] (Translated by Glenn Buchberger and Thomas H. Luxon)

Judging such verses John T. Shawcross has come to the conclusion that Charles Diodati had homoerotic interests, and Milton cherished a "latent homosexuality that

was probably repressed consciously (as well as subconsciously) from being overt, except *perhaps* with Diodati” [original emphasis] (59). However, Wagner warns us against deriving an abrupt conclusion: “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” (8). It could have been the normal male intimacy, not really any homoerotic attachment.

Even if the relationship with Diodati was purely on an intellectual level, Milton in *Paradise Lost* depicts a universe in which heterosexual culture of the time is thrown a serious challenge. The ‘Heaven’ that Milton depicts as an ideal entity does not encourage any kind of heteronormativity. In that sense Milton’s epic sets a precedence of the modern queer theory in literature. Milton unknowingly turns into an early advocate of some aspects of the present day queer theory.

In the epic Milton represents heteronormativity as a troubling concept. It is after all the heteroerotic desire of Adam that causes his downfall. He wanted a companion as all other creatures had, placed his request to God and his prayer was granted. This heteronormative desire later leads to his and Eve’s banishment. Eve is seduced by Satan and subsequently Adam steps in Eve’s way, he too eats the fruit of the forbidden tree inviting his disaster. The prelapsarian sex between Adam and Eve always has some tension and has never a spontaneous response from both. Eve has her meek surrender to Adam’s heteroerotic carnal passion as she participates half-heartedly with “half [embrace]...half her swelling breast [meeting his]” (IV. 494-95). Their postlapsarian sex is equally unfulfilling, as it is short-lived, drunken, and leaves the two “destitute and bare/ Of all their virtue” (IX. 1062-63). Milton thus represents patriarchy and heteronormative sexuality as troubling and hopeless. Eve transgresses the order of God by eating the Fruit of the forbidden Tree because she renders herself superior to or at least equal to Man.

In Book I Milton refers to the sulphurous earth of Hell and in “his womb was hid metallic ore” (I. 673). This masculine pronoun subverts the gender specificities found in the traditional language. Emily R. Kolpien says in “Queer 'Paradise Lost': Reproduction, Gender, and Sexuality”: “The landscape of Hell is capable of being simultaneously male and female and procreative and destructive” (16). Hell’s body is exploited violently and also sexually. The fallen angels open up a “spacious wound” (I. 689) in Hell, paralleling female reproductive organ. The “ribs of gold” (I. 690) that those angels prepare allude to Adam’s ribs wherefrom Eve was born. These “ribs of gold” and the masculine womb of Hell throw a challenge to the procreative authority of God the Father. It is worth-quoting in this connection what Kolpien says, “The image of a fertile Mother Earth is a well-known one, but here Milton contrasts this fecundity with the fetidity of her ‘bowels,’ queering notions of reproduction and

gender. Additionally, Milton's reference to the earth of Hell as 'their mother earth' appears to contrast with his earlier reference to it as 'his womb'" (16). The poet uses the imagery of immodest sexual approach:

Men also, and by his suggestion taught,
Ransacked the center, and with impious hands
Rifled the bowels of their mother earth
For treasures better hid. (I. 685-88)

Hell's body is the first female body that is treated with all violence and sexual aggression. The fallen angels ransack the body of Hell not simply to explore the "treasures better hid," definitely a sexual pun, but at the same time to revolt against God the Father, as if the female body is the property of God the Father and by ravaging this body and reducing that body simply to her reproductive organ, the fallen angels mark their revolt. Minaz Jooma remarks in "The Alimentary Structures of Incest in *Paradise Lost*":

A lust for political power, rendered as the gouging of a mother's entrails, conflates the desire to possess a valuable commodity with male sexual appetite. Mammon's example figures rebellion against the father specifically in terms of "rifling" that female who, as Freud would have it, most properly belongs to the father. The rape of "mother" earth, her enforced yielding of consumables and her bodily disfigurement are predicated upon the assumption that these will enable an alternate kingdom to be created. Each of these actions is graphically replicated in Book 2 when Satan encounters Sin and Death guarding the Gates of Hell. (30)

Although Satan created Sin out of his head when he first planned to rebel against God, he forgets all about it. Sin tells Satan,

Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem
Now in thine eyes so foul, once deemed so fair
In Heaven, when at the assembly and, in sight
Of all the seraphim, with thee combined
In bold conspiracy against Heaven's king,
All on a sudden miserable pain
Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,

Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,

Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed

Out of thy head I sprung? (Book II. 747-759)

Neil Forsyth writes, “The whole scene is painful and perverse, self-love replacing mutual love, but the genders are not bent” (84). Sin is born “likest to [Satan] in shape,” and she is thus not just his daughter, but also his feminine self. Satan immediately wants to have sex with Sin not only because she is attractive to him, but also because of his self-love since Sin shares his appearance. Satan thus has his queer attachment with Sin expressed in the form of his sexual craving for himself.

Satan’s creation of Sin without the involvement of either a female body or of God the Father is an act of narcissism, and this action of Satan is not only a violation against God, but is also a transgression of heteronormativity in terms of sex and reproduction. Jennifer Kaplan remarks:

Milton’s Satan is “queered” through his subversion of socially enforced binaries. Throughout the text, Milton both plays off of and against contemporary satanic cultural motifs. Ultimately, his radical reinterpretation creates a Satan who exists as a transgressor against contemporary notions of gender and sexuality. (“Queering Satan”)

Satan then moves from Hell to the abode of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden and in the course of this journey we also move through the different levels of irregularity in reproduction. Chaos is one such entity which Satan must travel through in order to be there in the Garden of Eden. The poet here writes,

. . . Into this wild abyss,

The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave,

Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire

But all these in their pregnant causes mixed

Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight

Unless the Almighty maker them ordain

His dark materials to create more worlds. (II. 910-916)

Reproduction as well as destruction occurs both in Hell and the Garden of Eden as described here.

Milton here makes a reference to Nature as a female entity by using the pronouns like ‘her’ although he earlier referred to the male womb of Hell and also to its mother earth. Milton adds too that Chaos has within it “pregnant causes” of air, water, fire and earth, all the elements responsible for germination or reproduction.

Emily R. Kolpien remarks, "From the masculine womb of Hell to the graveyard womb of Chaos, Milton queers reproduction throughout the poem through his conceptive language" ("Queer *Paradise Lost* 23").

Milton makes the character of Satan 'queer' by making him visible in contrast with God who is invisible and that invisibility makes God omnipresent. All celebrate the invisibility of God: "God their Creator, and the invisible/ Glory of Him that made them" (I. 369-70). On the other hand, Milton's Satan exists in all images of a brute or monster or a snake. Satan does not have any single sexual entity and that speaks of his othered and queered identity.

Milton queers the character of Sin as he does with Eve and Satan also. Sin becomes the victim of reproduction and sexual violence and thereby illustrates the epic's problematic perspective towards women. Her very birth is queer as she is born of Satan's head. Despite her queer procreation she becomes a victim of violence. Sin becomes a victim of incestuous sex with Satan, her father. Sin tells Satan:

Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam'st enamoured, and such joy thou took'st
With me in secret, that my womb conceived
A growing burden . . .
. . . My womb
Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown
Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes.
At last this odious offspring whom thou seest
Thine own begotten, breaking violent way
Tore through my entrails . . . (II. 764-83)

Death was thus born but she again becomes a victim of incestuous sex, as she recounts:

I fled, but he pursued (though more, it seems,
Inflamed with lust than rage) and swifter far,
Me overtook his mother all dismayed,

And in embraces forcible and foul

Engendering with me, of that rape begot,

Those yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry

Surround me. (II. 790-96)

Through Sin and Satan Milton transgresses sexual and reproductive normativity. Sin and Satan, traditionally heralding the hetero-patriarchal norms of the universe, are queer characters and depict the discursive nature of queerness in the text.

Both Sin and Eve are born of queered acts, but Sin is born from a single man only, whereas Eve is created as a result of involvement of both Adam and God. Eve is produced from the body of Adam as per the desire of God, and it again opens up a queer discourse as the creation excludes the involvement of the female body in the reproduction and involves instead two male characters. Adam is her progenitor and her lover at the same time and is comparable to Sin's incestuous relationship with Satan.

Eve's narcissism expressed in her look at the lake immediately after her creation unfolds her queer lustful passion for her feminine self in her very image on the lake. Her sexual desire for her image instills a sense of queerness in her. The great paradox is that Eve's queerness is quintessentially rooted in femininity, whereas she is a product of masculine authority and masculine body. Eve's autobiographical narration reveals the feminine queerness in her as she recounts:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked and found myself reposed
Under a shade of flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence thither brought and how.
Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
Of waters issued from a cave and spread
Into a liquid plain... (IV. 449-455)

And again she says:

As I bent down to look, just opposite
A shape within the wat'ry gleam appeared
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love. (IV. 460-465)

Eve loved not Adam but her own image on water. She thus first fell in love not with a man but with a woman, although having no idea that it was her own self. But God soon intervened and established the heteronormative norms that she must comply with:

. . . he
Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy
Inseparably thine, to him thou shalt bear
Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called
Mother of human race. (IV. 471-75)

Eve is compelled to follow the patriarchal sexual order and Adam “in delight/ Both of her beauty and submissive charms/ Smiled with superior love” (IV. 497-99).

Paradise Lost contains queer elements in its portrayal of heteronormativity that is troublesome, and Milton imagines a perfect society of angels in Heaven where there is no genital/ penetrative sexuality. Milton introduces a radical concept of sexuality, a heavenly version of sexual relationship that cuts across male/female binaries and promotes total orgasm and perfect union realized through ethereal embrace. In Book VIII Raphael refers to love and sex among the angels as genderless, and free from any restraint or obstacle. The angels transgress gender binaries through their homoerotic love and sex. Milton depicts the sex of angels as smooth and perfect and realized without any gender binaries. Raphael describes angelic sexuality thus:

. . . 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
Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need
As flesh to meet with flesh, or soul with soul. (VIII. 623-29)

In the description of angelic sexuality, as Raphael recounts, angels go beyond the level of the human, as “Total they mix,” every part integrating into the others. Sex among the angels is free from gender binaries and that adds to the queerness of the epic. Jonathan Goldberg considers Raphael’s description of the sex-life of the angels as “undeniably homo,” “where likeness is sameness,” where “the hierarchies that rank angels . . . are completely absent” (194). Raphael refers to a future time when as Goldberg says, “all will be all and differences will no longer obtain” (195). Some even

point out the homoerotic relationship between Raphael and Adam. Fisher writes in “Milton’s *Paradise Lost*”:

Raphael smiles; he does not shuffle, look down, turn aside. And burning red is the color of active love. Milton’s adding this one more detail of intense sensuality to Adam’s angelic teacher makes dramatic sense. Raphael’s registering so visually with his passionate sexuality stimulates Adam more than his maxims and warnings hinder Adam’s dotting on Eve. ... To flush, not blush, with active love is (besides dramatically right) certainly more angelic. The only problem is that Raphael is *not* talking to another angel. (3)

Adam requests God for companionship of one equal to him. It stems from homoerotic desire. Requesting for “Collateral love, and dearest amitie” (VIII. 425), he makes an appeal to God, “Among unequals what societie / Can sort, what harmonie or true delight”(VIII. 383-84). He puts emphasis on sameness as he appeals to God to create for him “Like of his like”(VIII. 423), an identical image of himself with whom he can procreate other copies. Again, when he narrates his story to Raphael he starts enjoying the latter’s company. His homoerotic desire wells up.

This homoerotic attachment is not found only in this epic of Milton, some of his early writings too dealt with this desire. Bruce Boehrer goes to the extent of labelling “Lycidas” as a homoerotic epithalamium, the “unexpressive nuptial Song” (176) being heard by the sinking Lycidas: “. . . the poem not only develops certain epithalamic features in a same-sex context; in a figurative sense it performs the act of wedlock that epithalamic verse is designed to memorialize and abet” (223). Stephen Gun-Bray writes that pastoral Writings, like *Epitaphium Damonis* by Milton, deliberately create a space for a discussion of homoeroticism. He 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). Milton’s attachment with Charles Diodati, as said earlier, has also come under serious speculation.

In “‘Fellowships of Joy’: Angelic Union in *Paradise Lost*,” Stephen Guy-Bray asserts that Milton in *Paradise Lost* promotes not the reproductive version of heterosexuality, as seen in case of Satan, Sin and Death, but “an non-reproductive and ultimately ungendered sexuality that we can only call queer” (1). According to Guy-Bray, the way Milton represents angelic sexuality conforms to the Renaissance practice of treating same-sex masculine friendship as the most perfect manifestation of attachment or bonding. This is what is very much present in the discourse between

Adam and Raphael. In *Preface to Paradise Lost* C S Lewis, however, did not find any homosexual agenda in *Paradise Lost* although Milton's language always did not show a good taste, according to Lewis (112-13).

All these challenge our heteronormative conventions and practices, and speak of gender perspectives usually ignored in traditional criticism of Milton. Queer theory imagines of a utopian world where heteronormativity does not exercise any hegemony. Milton draws up the image of an alternative universe where there would be no repressive sexuality, where human beings could have a satisfying sexual union, rather than suffer from sexual anxiety or crisis.

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