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# “Fellowships of Joy”: Angelic Union in *Paradise Lost*

STEPHEN GUY-BRAY

Since its first publication, many readers of *Paradise Lost* have been struck by the fact that Milton’s Adam and Eve have sex before the Fall – or, to use Milton’s terminology, that they perform “the Rites / Mysterious of connubial Love” (IV.742-3).<sup>1</sup> In conjunction with his emphasis on the tender closeness of Adam and Eve, Milton’s appreciative depiction of prelapsarian human sexuality would seem to establish a standard for human sexuality that is lost with the Fall and, as he goes on to point out, very different from our own experience of sexuality. Adam and Eve in Eden appear to display an original and originating heterosexuality compared to which all postlapsarian sexuality falls short in one way or another or indeed in several. In fact, it might well be the case that Milton characterizes Adam and Eve’s connubial rites as mysterious because he wants to suggest that we cannot understand them from our fallen perspective. Nevertheless, Adam and Eve’s marriage has typically been understood as an ideal that everyone should follow and historically as a crucial stage in the movement towards companionate marriage.

In this paper I shall argue, however, that not only is the love of Adam and Eve not the first heterosexuality in the poem but also that even before the Fall human sexuality (as opposed to angelic sexuality) is, if not entirely condemned, at least seen as a sign of the imperfect nature of all non-angelic creatures – humans as well as animals. As Raphael points out to Adam, sexual intercourse, which he describes as “the sense of touch whereby mankind / Is propagated” (VIII.579-80), is “voutsaft / To Cattel and each Beast” (VIII.581-2). In making the connection between sexuality and reproduction, Raphael’s comment appears to be exactly what we would expect in a Christian poem, but in the poem itself reproduction is not especially important; to me, Raphael’s attitude is more appropriate to sex after the Fall.<sup>2</sup> Kent R. Lehnhof reminds us that “Defoe had trouble accepting sex in the Garden because such sex would necessarily have been perfect, and perfect sex would invariably have ended in conception.”<sup>3</sup> I think that Defoe was wrong about what perfect sex is for Milton here: in *Paradise Lost*, only angelic sexuality is perfect. As James Grantham Turner points out, *Paradise Lost* is “virtually unique in ascribing active eroticism, not only to the unfallen Adam and Eve, but to angels both fallen and unfallen.”<sup>4</sup> What is more, angelic sex is sex between men, or what would have been called sodomy in Milton’s time.<sup>5</sup> Instead of an original and ideal heterosexuality, Milton gives us a non-reproductive and ultimately ungendered sexuality that we can only call queer.

In his presentation of ideal sexuality (or, more precisely if less concisely, ideal expressions of mutual love; for convenience, I shall stick with sexuality in

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this paper), Milton draws on the very popular tradition going back to the ancient Greeks and still enormously influential in Milton's own time according to which love between men was the highest form of love. In his book on Milton, Thomas H. Luxon argues that in *Paradise Lost* Milton tries "to harness classical friendship theory to the task of reforming heterosexual Christian marriage."<sup>6</sup> I would point out, however, that this is only true of his depiction of Adam and Eve: in Milton's depiction of the angels, we see the purest form of classical friendship, something to which classical writers aspired but which can only be achieved by angels. We also see in the angels the purest form of marriage: when Milton memorably describes marriage as turning two people into "one Flesh, one Heart, one Soule" (VIII.99), we should bear in mind that in the context of *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve's union (and, of course, all human unions since them) can only appear as an imperfect imitation of the unions that, as Raphael will inform Adam, angels can effortlessly achieve.<sup>7</sup>

Several critics have looked at this topic from the point of view of the classical literature on male friendships, but I think it is useful to consider the possibility that Milton also draws on Renaissance versions of this tradition. In the context of my argument here, I am especially interested in the versions by Edmund Spenser and by Sir Thomas Browne. In Book IV of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser distinguishes three kinds of love: familial, heterosexual, and male-male. These kinds are presented as a narrative in which a man goes from loving his family to loving a woman – "For naturall affection soone doth cesse, / And quenched is with *Cupids* greater flame" – and ultimately to loving another man: "So loue of soule doth loue of bodie passe."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps particularly interesting for us is that while love of one's family is fleeting, it is also the only kind of love described as "natural": both a man's love for a woman and a man's love for a male friend are tacitly presented as unnatural. As well, familial and heterosexual love are connected in being loves of the body, as opposed to the love of a male friend, which is seen as spiritual. In its presentation of human relationships, the *Faerie Queene* is an important precedent for *Paradise Lost*, but there are clearly some significant differences: familial affection does not exist in Milton's poem (with the exception of the story of Satan and Sin, which I shall discuss below), for instance, and, most crucially, the body / soul dichotomy so important to Spenser's formulation does not apply to Milton's angels.

Milton's presentation of ideal love in *Paradise Lost* is especially close to Sir Thomas Browne's comments on friendship in *Religio Medici*. Like Spenser, Browne assumes that the highest form of human relationship is masculine friendship; unlike Spenser, however, Browne is explicitly concerned with the ways in which even this kind of relationship is less than ideal. In writing of these friendships, Browne states that "united soules are not satisfied with embraces, but desire to be truly each other, which being impossible, their desires are infinite, and must proceed without a possibility of satisfaction."<sup>9</sup> While for Spenser, the "loue of soule" is what characterizes masculine friendship, for Browne it is the wish for absolute identity with the beloved. When Browne returns to the topic later he says that the "part of our loving friends that we love, is not that part that we embrace; but that insensible part that our armes cannot embrace."<sup>10</sup> Browne presents the

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literal embraces in which we delight as really metaphorical in that they merely represent the ideal conjunction between two souls. In this context, I would argue that it is not especially important whether these embraces are sexual or not: what matters is that when two human bodies touch, this touch simultaneously affirms their connection and their separation. As we shall see, the angelic sexuality of *Paradise Lost* is the logical next step.

Before I look at these ideal conjunctions, however, I want to consider what are for Milton the melancholy consequences of a physical expression of union. The original heterosexuality in Milton's world is not the relationship of Adam and Eve but rather the union of Satan and his offspring Sin. In Book II, Sin tells Satan that when he first plotted against God "shining heav'nly fair, a Goddess arm'd / Out of thy head I sprung" (II.757-8). While the angels at first found her repellent she eventually became attractive, especially to Satan himself:

full oft  
Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing  
Becam'st enamour'd, and such joy thou took'st  
With me in secret, that my womb conceiv'd  
A growing burden (II.763-7).

The result of this conception is the birth of Death, and so we see that the original pattern of heterosexuality and of family life is both incestuous and disastrous. What is more, this is a heterosexuality based on similarity and not on difference – something that is arguably true of Adam and Eve themselves as well, since the story of Eve's origin as Adam famously narrates it in Book VIII bears a close resemblance to the story of the origin of Sin and Death.

The story gets worse, of course: once Death is born he rapes his mother and begets "yelling Monsters" (II.795) which "when they list into the womb / That bred them . . . return" (II.798-9). Such, it seems, are the miseries of family life. It will not have escaped the reader's attention that it is Sin, the female figure (and, in fact, the first female figure ever), who suffers most, and it could be argued that her pains are in some sense connected to the punishment pronounced on Eve later in the poem. We could further support an argument that Milton is especially concerned with and especially alarmed by female iniquities by pointing out that the narration of this scene takes place by the side of the abyss Milton describes as

The Womb of nature, and perhaps her Grave,  
Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,  
But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt (II.911-13).

In this part of the poem, various kinds of unpleasantness (to put it mildly) are expressed through womb symbolism; the monstrous fertility of Sin is only one of the ways in which horror is expressed through the vagina.

The penis fares no better, however, as Sin's account of the birth of her son, conceived in incest, suggests:

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He my inbred enemie  
Forth issu'd, brandishing his fatal Dart  
Made to Destroy (II.785-7).

The reference to Death as Sin's "inbred enemie" suggests that to be related to someone is at least as likely to produce enmity as amity. Just as Satan and Sin establish a grim precedent for heterosexuality, so the first familial relationship in the poem establishes an equally gloomy precedent for family life, and one that clearly foreshadows Abel's murder, which is shown to Adam near the end of the poem. Similarly, Death's "fatal Dart" – at once the spear with which Death as a warrior does his work and the phallus with which he will repeatedly rape his mother – links the penis not primarily to sexual enjoyment, however one-sided, but rather to reproduction. In other words, it is not the case, as one might expect, that Milton condemns a sexuality unconnected to reproduction but instead that both male and female genitals, in this first ever example of sexual activity, are condemned even when they are used for what was traditionally felt to be their proper purpose.

What is more, the fallen angels are described throughout *Paradise Lost* in terms that suggest tumescence. We see this first when Satan speaks to the fallen angels in the first book and suggests that they cannot "fail to re-ascend / Self-rai's'd" (I.633-4), but perhaps the best example comes when Satan responds to Abdiel's reminder that God created them all by saying

We know no time when we were not as now;  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-rai's'd  
By our own quick'ning power (V.859-61).

Here, erection is presented as an image of stubbornness in a bad cause, in the very worst of causes. For these bad angels, the motiveless malignity of their tumescence is both precedent and warrant for a life free of obedience or veneration. If the story of Satan, Death, and Sin has given us a depressing picture of the origins of heterosexuality and family life, what appears to be the autotelic nature of the sexuality of the angels who are soon to fall suggests that there is no alternative – or, rather, that Milton has not given us one yet.

My point here is not that sexual activity in *Paradise Lost* is all bad: Milton explicitly presents sexual activity as one of the blessings of humanity, most notably in the hymn to wedded love (IV.750-75). Nevertheless, I think Milton's imagery throughout the poem demonstrates the dangers of a relation between two people that must take physical expression. Adam himself seems to be to some extent aware that the higher connection is between two souls. For instance, when he first sees Eve he says that man and woman "shall be one Flesh, one Heart, one Soul" (VIII.499) – thus neatly recapitulating Spenser's three types of love – and he tells Raphael that what he values in Eve is not primarily the sexual relation but rather all the things she does "which declare unfeign'd / Union of Mind, or in us both one Soul" (VIII.603-4). Much of the initial description of Adam and Eve in Books

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IV and V presents this union very movingly, but later in Book V we have the scene in which Satan asks Beelzebub “Sleepst thou Companion dear” (V.673) and adds

Thou to me thy thoughts  
Was wont, I mine to thee was wont t’impart;  
Both waking we were one; how then can now  
Thy sleep dissent? (V.676-9).

The language is as moving, the narrative situation very close to the scene earlier in the book in which Eve awakes from her bad dream.<sup>11</sup>

In part, of course, the similarity between these scenes is foreshadowing: Milton wants to suggest that while the closeness between Adam and Eve is one of the best things in the world of the poem, and while it sets a pattern for marital concord to which we should all aspire, it is this very closeness that will bring about Adam’s fall after Eve’s and because of Eve’s. But it is not just foreshadowing. As ethereal beings, the fallen angels still have access to a union to which humans cannot aspire. Milton has already gestured towards this union when he described the ending of the council in Hell:

O shame to men! Devil with Devil damn’d  
Firm concord holds, men only disagree  
Of Creatures rational (II.496-8).

Even in hell, then, the fallen angels have a concord – both in couples and as a group – that apparently surpasses human concord of any kind in much the same way, to cite two other examples from Book II, that their musical abilities surpass human abilities and their ability to build Pandemonium surpasses all human architectural feats.

But it is important to note that this infernal union, however superior it may be in many respects to human union, is still only partial. When Satan first sees Adam and Eve we learn something surprising about devils from Satan’s reaction:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two  
Imparadis’t in one anothers arms  
The happier *Eden*, shall enjoy thir fill  
Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust,  
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,  
Among our other torments not the least,  
Still unfulfill’d with pain of longing pines (IV.505-11).

The crucial point here is that the perfect union enjoyed by angels is not purely the relation of soul to soul, not only a disembodied merging of two beings, but also a desire that can be physically expressed and one that gives physical release – and I think that Milton’s use of the verb “to thrust” emphasises the physicality of angelic sexuality.

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Of course, the angelic orgasm to which Satan in vain aspires is not like a human orgasm since angelic bodies are not like human bodies. Typically for *Paradise Lost*, we first learn this in a bad context when Milton tells us that fallen angels can turn themselves into male or female spirits:

For Spirits when they please  
Can either Sex assume, or both; so soft,  
And uncompounded is thir Essence pure,  
Not ti'd or manacl'd with joynt or limb,  
Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,  
Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose  
Dilated or condens'd, bright or obscure,  
Can execute thir aerie purposes,  
And works of love or enmity fulfill (I.423-31).

Here, Milton explains how it is that the demons will be known in Biblical times as either Baalim (male) or Ashtaroth (female), and it is really only works of enmity that are at issue.

In the poem itself, however, we only see masculine angels. This is perhaps not surprising, as until the nineteenth century angels were (for the most part) depicted as male, but it is interesting to note that, as Lehnhof has remarked in a superb article on masculinity in *Paradise Lost*, “Adam is the epic’s only male.”<sup>12</sup> As the passage I have just quoted from Book I makes clear, in *Paradise Lost* what we think of as masculinity and femininity are merely disguises for angels. But as Lehnhof goes on to point out, “the characters in *Paradise Lost* who are not “really” (that is, substantially) male seem secure in their masculinity, while the lone character who is “really” male cannot keep from becoming effeminate.”<sup>13</sup> It would seem that the masculinity we know here on Earth is substantial without being real in an important sense, just as – to return to the *Religio Medici* – the substantial embraces we give to our friends (and, by extension, to our lovers) are not real either: as was the case with Browne, we could say that what we take to be literal is revealed to be metaphorical. In Milton’s poem, the angels, who have neither bodies nor gender in our sense, epitomize a genuine sex and a genuine sexuality for which we can find only substitutes – the touch which Raphael rather dismissively mentions.

In the poem, our first example of the angelic ability to assume any shape as a work of enmity comes when Satan disguises himself to find out from Uriel the way to Earth:

And now a stripling Cherub he appeers,  
Not of the prime, yet such as in his face  
Youth smil'd Celestial, and to every Limb  
Sutable grace diffus'd (III.636-9).

I think it is significant that Satan takes the form not only of an angel but, in particular, the form of an especially young and beautiful angel. What is more, I

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would argue that the passage anticipates the “Tall stripling youths rich clad, of fairer hew / Than *Ganymede* or *Hylas*” who form part of Jesus’ temptations in *Paradise Regain’d*.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of *Paradise Lost* we see Satan take other disguises – most notably the serpent – but I want to stress that he begins by assuming male beauty in the form considered most attractive by both Renaissance and classical poets and that he does so in a context that suggests that male beauty is attractive even to the highest of the angels.

Our sense of the power of male beauty in *Paradise Lost* is underlined by Raphael’s refulgent beauty when he appears to Adam: as Turner points out, “Raphael’s entrance is . . . charged with sexual energy.”<sup>15</sup> Nor is it only Raphael’s physical manifestation that is sexualized: the long conversation between him and Adam, however full of useful religious doctrine it may be, is presented as a love scene. Admittedly, this view of their conversation is not the conventional one among Miltonists, but there have been some exceptions. Arguing that the scene between Adam and Raphael is the highpoint of the poem’s homoeroticism, Linda Gregerson has pointed out that their conversation contains “deliberate invocations of erotic love poetry” and that critics have considered these only as examples of “idealized male ‘friendship.’”<sup>16</sup> Even more recently, Jonathan Goldberg has focused on the erotics of this passage, noting, for instance, the connection between Raphael’s statement to Adam – “Nor are thy lips ungrateful, sire of men” (VIII.218) – and Milton’s comment about Eve’s attitude to conversation with Adam just a few lines earlier – “from his lip / Not words alone pleased her” (VIII.56-7).<sup>17</sup>

In the passage I have just cited from Gregerson, the inverted commas around friendship appear to indicate that we should really understand the connection between the man and the angel as sexual, but I would argue that it is crucial to see the connection as both friendly and sexual. Raphael and Adam represent the highest form of masculine friendship: while for Adam, at least, the true connection with his friend of which Browne writes is not possible (or not yet possible: Raphael holds out the hope that humans may eventually become angels), Milton is careful to present the conversation as a meeting of souls that is also an encounter between beautiful men. For me, it is this encounter, rather than the marriage of Adam and Eve, that is the paradigmatic relationship in *Paradise Lost*, if not the ideal one. To return to Spenser is helpful here. Spenser presents masculine friendship as a force that disciplines both familial and marital love: “But faithfull friendship doth them both suppress, / And them with maystring discipline doth tame.”<sup>18</sup> One way to see what happens in *Paradise Lost* is to consider that Adam and Eve’s actions have sentenced all their descendents to imperfect and unruly heterosexuality and foreclosed the possibility of the angelic homosexuality Raphael offers to Adam.

As male beauty is the standard of beauty in *Paradise Lost*, so angelic sexual expression is the standard of sexual expression. We learn this when Raphael answers Adam’s question about love among angels:

Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy’st



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(And pure thou wert created) we enjoy  
In eminence, and obstacle find none  
Of membrane, joynt, or limb, exclusive barrs:  
Easier then Air with Air, if Spirits embrace,  
Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure  
Desiring; nor restrain'd conveyance need  
As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul (VIII.622-9).

The most relevant part of the speech for my purposes here is “Total they mix.” Earlier, Raphael explained to Adam that the substance of angelic being is very different from that of humans: “All Heart they live, all Head, all Eye, all Ear, / All Intellect, all sense” (VI.350-1). And all genitals as well then: the union of angel with angel is not the union of soul with soul alone, but a total and mutual interpenetration throughout their beings.

As I pointed out earlier, the highest form of relationship in Renaissance England was masculine friendship, because that was felt to be a relationship between souls. Even there, however, the union cannot be absolute and the embraces we give our friends are only substitutes; as a result, even masculine friends “must proceed without a possibility of satisfaction,” to return to Browne’s wording. Milton would appear to be making a similar point in implicitly contrasting the imperfections of the marriage of Adam and Eve and the fatal differences between them with angelic unions: after all, in *Paradise Lost*, the highest form of relationship is not the human marriage that takes up so much of the poem but the angelic unions that humans imitate. The marriage of Adam and Eve is the best human relationship possible (and in the context of Renaissance literature Milton is an innovator in giving a heterosexual union this sort of primacy), but as I have already pointed out, in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve are not even the first heterosexual couple: that honour is reserved for Satan and Sin. What is more, it is the relationship between Adam and Raphael that is the poem’s best relationship. For Milton, while humans apparently cannot escape from heterosexuality, even the marriage so central to church and state can only be an imperfect imitation of heavenly homoeroticism.

When Browne writes that even masculine friends cannot find satisfaction, he means that they cannot achieve a true union; for us now, however, it is tempting to understand satisfaction in a sexual sense and to read this passage as referring to Renaissance prohibitions against sex between men. I mention this because I do not want to be taken to argue that *Paradise Lost* is a manifesto for gay love, however tempting such a conclusion would be. For instance, just as we could argue that the union of Satan and Sin taints heterosexuality, so we could argue that the union of Satan and Beelzebub taints homosexuality. As regards sexuality at least, in *Paradise Lost* the Fall happened before the Fall. Nevertheless, the male-male unions alluded to by Raphael remain the best kind of relationship possible. The theologian Mark Jordan has defined sodomy as “the pure essence of the erotic without connection to reproduction,” a definition that perfectly fits the loves of Milton’s angels.<sup>19</sup> Measured against this celestial sodomy, human sexuality, whether pre or postlapsarian, whether homosexual or heterosexual, can only fall short. It is in this

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establishment of same-sex unions as the real thing rather than as belated or imitative or secondary that Milton is not only queer but also, I think, that he manages to queer all of creation.

### Notes

1. All references to the works of Milton are to the edition by John Shawcross.
2. In a very good recent discussion of touch in *Paradise Lost*, Joe Moshenska has persuasively argued that although Raphael seems to be an entirely conventional and orthodox commentator on sexual love, we may well see his perspective as limited. See “Transported Touch,” especially 3 and 9. Moshenska also points out that Raphael’s stress on propagation could seem odd; see 11 *et seq.* Similarly, James Grantham Turner says that ‘Raphael is by no means an infallible guide’; see *One Flesh*, 278.
3. Lehnhof, “Nor turnd I weene,” 68.
4. Goldberg, *One Flesh*, 53.
5. As angels can assume any form they like – a point Milton makes more than once – other kinds of coupling (and not just coupling) are of course possible. But as Jonathan Goldberg remarks, “The ability of angels to assume whatever form they choose . . . seems realized only in couplings across kind, transformation across gender” (198). When angels interact, they are always male.
6. Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 3. As the subtitle of Luxon’s book indicates, his focus is on friendship and marriage throughout Milton’s work; by the time he gets to *Paradise Lost*, however, his focus is almost entirely on Adam and Eve. Good recent treatments of the topic that also neglect the angels are Edwards, “Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Paradise”; and Willie, “Spiritual Union and the Problem of Sexuality.”
7. In *The Reformation of the Subject*, Linda Gregerson points out that “the interpenetrating angels are explicitly imagined on the same continuum of desire that comprehends angelic sexuality” (174), so perhaps the imitation will ultimately be successful.
8. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, IV.ix.2.1-2 and 8.
9. Browne, *Religio Medici*, 131.
10. *Ibid*, 156.
11. For Goldberg’s account of this passage, see *The Seeds of Things*, 196.
12. Lehnhof, “Performing Masculinity in *Paradise Lost*,” 64. Here he cites specifically I.423-31 and VI.350-3.
13. *Ibid*, 68. See also 65: “the masculinity of these nonmale angels is quite convincing”; here Lehnhof cites X.888-95.
14. *Paradise Regain’d*, II.352-3. For discussions of the homoerotic nature of this temptation, see Bredbeck, “Milton’s Ganymede”; and Summers, “The (Homo)Sexual Temptation in Milton’s *Paradise Regained*.”
15. Turner, *One Flesh*, 270. Turner appears to think that the sexiness is for Eve’s benefit and the intellectual enlightenment for Adam’s.
16. Gregerson, *The Reformation of the Subject*, 174. See 174-5 for Gregerson’s discussion of the conversation between Raphael and Adam.
17. See Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 188-95.
18. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, IV.ix.2.3-4.
19. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, 176.

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