CHAPTER 2

Queering as Critical Practice in Reading *Paradise Lost*

Thomas H. Luxon

We can understand this volume's title, *Queer Milton*, in at least two ways. One way counts "queer" as an adjective describing Milton and his work as "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric," even perversely at odds with the quintessentially hetero-normative story his poem ostensibly endorses (*OED*). That would be to label Milton and his work "queer," and would amount to assigning Milton and his work to a category of identity that will surprise some and gratify a few. Another way of reading "queer" in the title is as a verb, an imperative verb, which advocates a critical practice that, in Carla Freccero's words, is "inimical to the construction of categories of identity."[1] Such a critical practice, says Carolyn Dinshaw, "works by contiguity and displacement, knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange … and it provokes inquiry into the ways that the 'natural' has been produced by particular discursive matrices of heteronormativity."[2] This version of "queer" names a deconstructive critical practice that insists on the tendency of "tropological dimensions of language [to] subvert the very

T. H. Luxon (✉)
Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA

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heteronormativity of Western logocentrism" (Freccero 19).[3] This essay will try to pursue something like such a queer critical practice, but it is worth recognizing from the outset that this practice of queer reading has a strong tendency to produce a Milton (both historical person and body of work) that answers to something troublingly like a category of identity, however unintentionally.

Milton's work provides especially rich opportunities for detecting and exploring the fundamental contradictions (the queernesses) at the heart of Western logocentrism for at least two reasons. First because Milton composed his heroic poems (*Paradise Lost, Paradise Regain'd,* and *Samson Agonistes*) at a critical moment when Renaissance Christian humanism began to give way to the Deist rationalism of the coming century.[4] Milton's attempt to "justifie the wayes of God to men" (*PL* 1.26) in blank heroic verse amounts to the last great effort to insist on the relevance of an episteme rooted in biblical exegesis and the doctrines constructed upon it, an episteme that at least one of Milton's contemporaries believed was on the brink of collapse.[5] In his poem, "On *Paradise Lost*," Andrew Marvell expressed his own fear that Milton's epic efforts to conserve that world-view might actually have the unintended result of bringing it all crashing down:

> When I beheld the Poet blind, yet bold,
> In slender Book his vast Design unfold,
> Messiah Crown'd, Gods Reconcil'd Decree,
> Rebelling Angels, the Forbidden Tree,
> Heav'n, Hell, Earth, Chaos, All; the Argument
> Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,
> That he would ruine (for I saw him strong)
> The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song
> (So Sampson groap'd the Temples Posts in spight)
> The World o'rewhelming to revenge his sight.[6]

During Milton's lifetime, Western Christianity was just beginning to lose its hegemonic grip on cultural consciousness, a grip that has not yet disappeared. At historical moments such as that, the many thousand cracks in the scaffold, or what Slavoj Žižek called the hard kernels of contradiction around which any ideology forms itself, appear more clearly and, I will claim in what follows, more queerly.[7] At times, Milton's poetry seems deliberately to invite queer reading practices; how much of that Milton would enjoy or even admire, is difficult to say.

Stephen Guy-Bray delivers brilliantly on the promise in his essay "'Fellowships of Joy': Angelic Union in *Paradise Lost*" by pointing out that Milton's epic, intentionally or not, locates the origin of heterosexuality in Satan and his daughter Sin, "and so we see that the original pattern of heterosexuality and of family life is both incestuous and disastrous."[8] What's more, Satan's desire for his offspring is oddly "based on similarity and not on difference" threatening to undo the underpinnings of heteronormativity by suggesting that it is, at root, already queer, dangerously queer as the poem seems to suggest. Guy-Bray exposes the queerness in Milton's poem by a practice Freccero describes this way:

> *queer* moves in the space between hetero- and homo-, normative and non-, in order to reinscribe, by occupying a place within but not containable by, heteronormative phallocentric logic. (18)

Paradise Lost is peculiarly well-suited to queering as a critical practice because it claims to tell the originating story of human sexuality and its corresponding categories of identity: the story of the first man and the first woman, the first marriage, even the first coupling, and so on. Guy-Bray's article draws our attention to what we might call the supplemental first beings—the beings in Milton's per-version of Genesis that exist *before* the first human beings: angels, God and his Son, Satan and his only-begotten daughter. In what follows, I am tempted to call these *pre-first* beings, but I will settle for the more scholarly locution: supplemental first beings. The poem invokes Genesis, "In the Beginning" (*PL* 1.9), only to insist on quite another beginning, a pre-beginning story that unfolds some untold ages before the creation of light, the firmament, Heaven and Earth (Genesis 1–8).[9] Milton's poem imagines a heaven before the creation of the firmament named Heaven in Genesis 1:8; the poem's pre-heaven stages the drama of the rebel angels whose fall establishes that other pre-first place, Hell, a place never mentioned in either of the creation stories of Genesis 1–2. Even in Milton's own wonderful descriptions, Hell is a kind of non-place (*PL* 1.60–63, 228–29). Perhaps we should think of Milton's pre-heaven, Hell, and even Chaos as deeply queer places, places that try to supply the supplements required to underwrite the realness of the places named in Hebrew scripture. And in this effort to supply pre-existent supplements to guarantee the existence of places already shifting into myth, Milton's imagination hurries them on their way to unreality.[10]

From the perspective of these supplemental first places and supplemental first beings (Hell and the fallen angels), the newly created Earth, Eden, and the first human beings appear supplementary to them. Raphael reports that the loyal angels sang praises to God for creating "in stead/Of Spirits maligne a better Race to bring/Into thir vacant room" (*PL* 7.188–90). From Raphael's perspective, the first man and woman are supplementary, reparative creations, created "in stead" of the creatures who turned evil, and then welcomed into "thir vacant room," re-placing them, not quite in their old supplementally first place of heaven, but in a new world that is more heaven-like than heavenly. Milton's poem begins with a heavenly (and hellish) perspective on first things that renders the Genesis first places and beings not first at all, but supplemental to a set of supernatural first places and beings. And the story of these supplementally first beings tends to pre-determine the story of the first beings and their meanings.

From our perspective as critical readers, however, the logic of supplementarity is reversed: the angels and devils and Heaven and Hell are the supplements, added to the Genesis story in order to make the first married couple and their first home underwrite heteronormative conventions of Protestant Christianity. These supplements are supposed to pre-determine (even over-determine) the significance of the first creatures and human beings, but they also, by their very presence, undermine the firstness of those same creatures. Underwriting meanings and undermining those same meanings is how the (il)logic of the supplement works in *Paradise Lost*. The more the poem insists on its doctrinal points—heteronormative marriage, "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (*PL* 4.299), free will, and the justness of God's ways—the more it will invite the kind of queer reading Guy-Bray and I find ourselves practicing.[11] My claim is not so much that the poem is queer, still less that Milton is queer, but that Milton's poem exerts so much pressure on proving the unprovable and trying to render the paradoxical rough places plain, that it cannot help but invite, maybe even prompt, us to read it with queer eyes and ears.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Milton *invented* all these supplemental beings and places (though Raphael is certainly his own contribution), but perhaps Milton scholars ought to be more surprised than we have been that a Puritan solascripturist whose heterodox views of marriage and Christology claim to rely exclusively on strict interpretation of the word of God, eschewing custom and tradition as corruptions

of God's truth, opted to include these (at best) apocryphal beings in his epic retelling of Genesis 1–3. Was there no way to make the Genesis story heroic enough without these unbiblical or parabiblical beings, places and events? Or even if we could be made to see pastoral Eden as the site of a newly articulated domestic heroism, would the poem fail to out-do all previous epics—Greek, Roman, and Renaissance Italian—fail to soar above "the middle flight" of previous Puritan hexameral poems like Du Bartas' *Semaines*? Milton insisted that his English epic would be an "adventrous Song," one that "pursues/Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime" (*PL* 1.13–16). That ambition becomes visible only to the extent that his poem engages with foregoing epic practices. He cannot simply invoke the Holy Spirit, or Moses' muse without also alluding to the Aonian Mount. Angels and devils replace the pagan gods and goddesses of classical epic in a bid to replace a pagan supernature with a Christian, but the outcome cannot succeed for two reasons: insofar as the angels and devils assume the epic roles of pagan gods and goddesses, they become less than purely Christian; more important, this supposedly Christian supernature has no basis in Genesis, the text that Milton insists tells us all we need to know about the first man and woman and the first marriage.[12]

All of this leads me to propose that Milton's poem invites queer critical practice from its very beginning, in its insistence on a pre-Genesis "beginning." By presenting the first human beings as supplemental replacements of mythically unbiblical pre-first beings, creatures meant to repair or replace the epic fallenness of one third of the fallen angels, the poem guarantees that our understanding of Adam, Eve, and marriage must depend on our ability to unpack the various logics of the supplement, and that is, according to Freccero, "always already" a queer critical practice. What's more, Milton's mythically apocryphal angels are all male and their love-making, by Raphael's report, is a higher version of human heterosexual coupling, more eminent in its homoerotic purity, an eminence beyond the physical, even beyond the metaphysical:

> Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st
> (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. (*PL* 8.622–29)

What we are tempted to label as queer—angel sex—the poem insists is nothing more than married heterosexual coupling taken to a very advanced stage of "eminence"—beyond flesh even beyond souls (and, we ought to recognize, having nothing to do with marriage). But what if angel sex is even beyond homoerotic because beyond gender altogether? And this does not even begin to engage with the logic of the motherless Son of God, begotten at a time when all the original beings knew nothing of the feminine.[13] In what may be argued the least biblical episode of Milton's story, the first female to emerge among the supplemental first beings, as Guy-Bray points out, is Sin, the only begotten (and also motherless) daughter of Satan.

Having circled back to Guy-Bray's path-breaking reading, I now want to try to unpack what I take to be Milton's insistently Puritan understanding of gender in *Paradise Lost*. It owes a great deal, as critics long have recognized, to Milton's intensive pursuit of a strictly biblical understanding of marriage in his four divorce tracts, all of which repeatedly insist that we understand marriage according to its founding document: Genesis 2:4–25.

Milton tried (and in the short-term, failed) to redefine marriage for the discipline of the English Church. His account in *Tetrachordon* of what the Bible teaches as the founding purposes of marriage follows Continental reformed interpreters by turning Roman Catholic and Church of England teachings almost on their heads. Like customary Catholic teaching, the English Church regarded marriage as instituted by God principally for procreation and as a remedy for male incontinence.[14] Other purposes such as civil fellowship and amity, or mutual help in both exercises of piety and household affairs, may obtain, but have no priority. According to Milton's exegesis, God intended marriage for the following purposes, ranked in order of priority:

1. "mutuall help to piety"
2. "civill fellowship of love and amity"
3. "generation" of offspring
4. "houshold affairs"
5. "*lastly* the remedy of incontinence" (*Tetrachordon* Yale Prose 2.599, my emphasis)

In both the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643, 1644) and *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), Milton understands marriage in far more gender-specific terms than the quotations above would suggest. There, the principal reason for God to create a woman and thereby institute marriage, is not unlike the reason advanced for creating Adam as a replacement for the fallen Satan. Genesis 1 tells us that God reflected upon all his works of creation and found them "good," even "very good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). But the logic of the story in Genesis 2, the story that introduces gender dimorphism, depends on a lack. God determines that there is one aspect to his otherwise "very good" creation that is "not good" and it is this God-discovered lack that Milton takes to be the foundation of human sexual difference, the creation of woman, and (what amounts to the same thing) the institution of heterosexual marriage:

> And what his chiefe end was of creating woman to be joynd with man, his own instituting words declare, and are infallible to informe us what is mariage, and what is no mariage; unlesse we can think them set there to no purpose: *It is not good*, saith he, *that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him*. From which words so plain, lesse cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned Interpreter, then that in Gods intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of mariage; for we find here no expression so necessarily implying carnall knowledg, as this prevention of lonelinesse to the mind and spirit of man. (*DDD* Yale Prose 2.245–46)

Milton's reading of Genesis directs us to a queer critical reading—to regard marriage and the existence of women as direct consequences of a constitutive lack in God's otherwise "good" creation. The first man is alone, where alone does not mean complete—all-one, self-sufficient—as it does for Milton's God (more on this below). It is as if being all-one were actually its opposite—in-complete, un-finished, insufficient, "not good."[15]

We also hear in the *Doctrine and Discipline* a foretaste of the higher love, the love eminent in purity, that Raphael says angels enjoy. Milton thought traditional marriage doctrine which foregrounded "generation" and the "remedy of incontinence" impugned the dignity of man, aligning him, even before the fall from innocence, with beasts. When God paraded the beasts before Adam, Milton reminds us, it was not just to

see what he would name them; it was also to make the point that among the beasts "there was not found a help meet for him" (Genesis 2:20); none of them merited the name "wo-man," the apt remedy for man's aloneness. Thus, he concludes that marriage is peculiarly human because it rises far above "the sensitive pleasing of the body," even above the command to procreate:

> And indeed it is a greater blessing from God, more worthy so excellent a creature as man is, and a higher end to honour and sanctifie the league of mariage, whenas the solace and satisfaction of the minde is regarded and provided for before the sensitive pleasing of the body. (*DDD* Yale Prose 2.246)

In Milton's version of "In the Beginning," God makes Adam in order to repair the lack left by the fallen angels, only to discover Adam himself has a constitutive lack that can be remedied by no other creature yet in existence. God must make one for him, not this time out of the earth (creation's womb and Adam's literal mother), but out of Adam himself, making his body, in effect, Eve's literal mother.[16] Is Eve the supplement that erases lack? Then why does the poem characterize her as lacking in wisdom, lacking in access to God? Or is she simply the last, best supplement in a chain of failed creatures? Clearly not, for Milton wants her to be seen as the earthly mother of the last-best supplement in a chain of failed creatures—Jesus Christ, the version of the Son who *does* have a mother. Is this queer enough yet?

Now, we are ready to take a fresh look at how this all gets articulated in Book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton imagines that Adam discovers his "not good" state of loneliness before God tells him of it, as if the founding premise of human aloneness looks more credible to us if Adam discovers it himself and raises the issue with God, who, in Milton's per-version of the Genesis story, pretends he hasn't noticed the problem.[17] In response to Adam's presumptuous complaint that he cannot be happy in Paradise "alone" (*PL* 8.364–67), Milton's God pretends not to understand Adam's use of the word, "solitude":

> What call'st thou solitude, is not the Earth
> With various living creatures, and the Aire
> Replenisht, and all these at thy command
> To come and play before thee; know'st thou not

> Thir language and thir wayes? They also know,
> And reason not contemptibly; with these
> Find pastime, and beare rule; thy Realm is large.
> So spake the Universal Lord, and seem'd
> So ordering. (*PL* 8.369–77)

God, the "Author of this Universe," seems to be *ordering* Adam to have conversation and "Find pastime" with the beasts he has just named. Conversation of various sorts, it seems: talking and playing and reasoning. Beasts, God alleges, "reason not contemptibly." He urges Adam to command the beasts to "play before thee." In this passage, the bright line Milton tried (unsuccessfully) to draw, in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, between rational and carnal conversation is gone.

Consider first that Milton imports the notion of the birds and beasts "Approaching two and two"—in couples—from the Noah story in Exodus. Genesis 2:19 says nothing about animals and birds being brought to Adam in couples. (Genesis also says nothing about sea creatures, so Milton feels obliged to remedy this oversight in lines 345–48.) Importing from the Noah story an image of animals in couples brings with it the notion of procreational conversation: "to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth" (Genesis 7:3).[18] Milton need not have done this; he could have imagined an Adam interested only in conversation of a "rational" sort (8.391). He could have left us simply with an image of Adam as a kind of biblical Dr. Doolittle. Instead he asks us to imagine all sorts of conversations, even those in which Adam commands beasts to "play" before him. Having deliberately arranged the beasts in couples, "play" cannot rule out sexual play, can it? Is God suggesting voyeuristic pleasures? In fact, Adam betrays exactly such imaginations when he tries to explain to God that he seeks "rational delight, wherein the brute/ Cannot be human consort" (8.391–92). He already has in mind the sorts of pleasures each beast takes "with thir kinde" (393); he even tries to imagine interspecies conversational coupling—"Bird with Beast, or Fish with Fowle" (395)—and finds such imagined converse impossible, but not unthinkable.

But "play before thee" and "Find pastime" here suggest other, even more complicated senses. These phrases recall Milton's allusions to Proverbs 8 in *Tetrachordon*. There he tried (with some success) to help us imagine marriage as a kind of conversational pleasure "besides the genial bed" in which a man can take a much-needed break from

"intense thought and labour" (amongst his fellow men) and his soul, "like a glad youth in wandring vacancy, may keep her hollidaies to joy and harmles pastime" (Yale Prose 2.596–97). Then he asks us to compare this sort of conversational pleasure to that God enjoys with "eternall wisdom": "God himself conceals us not his own recreations before the world was built; I was, saith the eternall wisdome, dayly his delight, playing alwayes before him" (Yale Prose 2.596–97).[19] In fact, according to Proverbs 8:23–30, to which Milton alludes here, Wisdom tells us that she has been with God "from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. … When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth. … I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him." The implied analogies here are disturbing: Adam is to the beasts as God is to Wisdom, and married conversation is to beasts playing as God is to Wisdom rejoicing. Adam finding pastime with the beasts is not at all like God keeping company with Wisdom, and the poem raises these possibilities only to shut them down, but they refuse to disappear. They have just as powerful an afterlife as the images of Satan raping his only begotten daughter in some sort of narcissistic trance. Indeed, when Adam first sees Eve, and experiences "the charm of Beauties powerful glance" (8.533), he risks losing all sense of proportion and self-esteem, and starts to regard her as his superior, even Wisdom's superior (551–53). His world, inner and outer, is turned upside down.[20]

And there is another disturbing consequence to these allusions and implied analogies: the distinction this poem tries so hard to draw between God's perfect solitude and Man's imperfect solitude is defeated even before it is articulated. The allusions to Proverbs and eternal Wisdom remind us that God was never truly alone, that he always took daily delight in Wisdom's company, "as one brought up with him" (Proverbs 8:30). So when Milton's God asks Adam to consider his experience of happiness in eternal solitude—

> What think'st thou then of mee, and this my State,
> Seem I to thee sufficiently possest
> Of happiness, or not? who am alone
> From all Eternitie, for none I know
> Second to mee or like, equal much less. (*PL* 8.403–407)

—the argument that God is complacent in eternal solitude has already been fatally undercut, even before God confesses to holding "converse"

with "the Creatures which I made, and those/ To me inferiour" (408–10). Milton's poem does not even try to depict a God complacent in solitude, whatever he may say here to Adam. Book 3 depicts him as seated "High Thron'd above all highth," but "About him all the Sanctities of Heaven/ Stood thick as Starrs, and from his sight receiv'd/ Beatitude past utterance" (*PL* 3.58–62). Heaven is what it is—a blessed place—*because* he blesses it with his constant regard. I once characterized this most fundamental of all identity distinctions—that between Creator and creature, godliness and manliness, unengendered and engendered—as the "first gender distinction."[21] It is probably more correct to say it is the distinction upon which early modern Christianity wants to build out a whole range of stable binaries meant to underwrite categories of identity, including its sex-gender system. But there is, of course, no stability here. And the more energetic the effort to insist on originary stability, the more the signifiers and their signifieds slip into play.

Even though the premise—that God is alone from all eternity and just fine with that—has already been undermined, Milton's Adam forges ahead with his articulation of what distinguishes "Man" from his Creator:

> Thou in thy self art perfet, and in thee
> Is no deficience found; not so is Man,
> But in degree, the cause of his desire
> By conversation with his like to help,
> Or solace his defects. (*PL* 8.415–19)

God is perfect—complete in himself. Man is imperfect, and imperfect in precisely the way God is perfect—singularity. It would have been an easier task simply to point out that a created being is less perfect than an uncreated being, but that is not the line of argument Milton has Adam pursue. Man's deficiency is not a matter of being different from God in kind, but different "in degree." Adam, we recall, learned this monistic doctrine from Raphael in Book 5.[22] Adam, like God, bears rule over the creatures of earth, and is himself a creator. He recognizes himself as God's "substitute" on Earth (8.381). Raphael teaches him that he, like "All things," come from "one first matter" and is destined to return to that state of perfection (5.470–72). Accordingly, Adam chooses to explain the difference between God and Man, not as an absolute difference in kind, but a difference "in degree." Raphael named this difference

as "various degrees/ Of substance, and in things that live, of life;/ But more refin'd, more spiritous, and pure,/ As neerer to him plac't or neerer tending" (5.473–76). Adam is more substantial than God, less spirituous; that is to say, he has a body, a pure body, to be sure, but to have a body is to be less pure than one without a body. Purity, like substance, Milton insists, is a matter of degrees.

This argument, however, undermines itself for two reasons. First, as I have argued elsewhere, a spectrum of degree still entails binary distinctions. Pure is still the opposite of less pure; "neerer" still the opposite of further. And somewhere on the spectrum of degrees of purity and substance we must imagine a body turns to spirit and discursive reason gives way to intuitive reason (5.478–490); once these thresholds are passed, beings can enjoy love-making "In eminence" because the obstacles of body and soul have disappeared (8.624–29). Milton's and Adam's monism fails to do away with the binary categories of body and spirit. The second reason this argument undermines itself is because the poem fails to imagine for us a bodiless God, or any truly bodiless beings. Even as Adam tries to explain God's absolute aloneness, Milton guarantees that we shall see him tangled in paradox and contradiction:

> No need that thou
> Shouldst propagat, already infinite;
> And through all numbers absolute, though One;
> But Man by number is to manifest
> His single imperfection, and beget
> Like of his like, his Image multipli'd,
> In unitie defective, which requires
> Collateral love, and deerest amitie. (*PL* 8.419–26)

The editors of the Modern Library Milton helpfully point out that line 421 "Englishes the Latin *omnibus numeris absolutus*, meaning 'complete in every part,'" a quotation from one of Pliny the Younger's letters.[23] In that brief letter, Pliny expresses his approval of a friend's new book. A fuller (and more accurate) quotation of the passage is *Legi enim librum omnibus numeris absolutum* as we find it in the Loeb edition, where it is translated this way: "I have read his very finished performance."[24] Adam cannot be alluding to Pliny, but Milton certainly is, and this severely undercuts Adam's effort to explain how God can be described as complete in all his infinite parts and yet still "One." Is God

complete the way a good book, a finished performance, is complete? No good book, of course, is infinite, for that would be far from complete, hardly "a finished performance." When we hear Pliny's letter in Adam's words, reasoned doctrine turns into a simile, and a weak one at that: God's unity is like that of a well-finished book.

Adam's assertion that God is "through all numbers absolute, though One" invites further inquiry. At first this seems like an apposite observation following the claim that God, unlike creatures, does not need to propagate because he already is infinite. God is always already infinite in number and singular at the same time. Such a paradox also implies that God cannot be captured by the binaries of being and not-being, creature and creator, that we find necessary for rational naming and logic. He also defies another binary, the mathematical distinction between 1 and −1, or between any number and its mirror opposite, its negative. Through all numbers, he is "absolute," as in the absolute value of any number. From where Adam (and we) sit, God is irrational, and irrational may just be another sort of queer. Truth be told, it is often hard to decide whether Milton actually means to be a kind of blind Samson pulling down the temple of a worn-out episteme, or if he is desperately trying to shore it up.[25]

It gets worse. Or, perhaps, better. The word "beget" brings with it a different heap of allusive trouble, for it reminds us of God's begetting of his only Son, one of the most impenetrably contradictory of Christian doctrines.[26] Whether God *needed* to propagate or not is a moot question; he did propagate when he announced to all the "Progenie of Light, … This day I have begot whom I declare/ My onely Son" (*PL* 5.600–4). Both of these passages allude to Psalm 2:7: "I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." As in the Psalm, Milton begs the question of whether the Son is the Son of God by adoption (declaration) or by generation (begotten), but Adam is not so subtle.[27] He claims that the act of begetting distinguishes men from God; God may create, but men manifest their imperfection by begetting. Here, the Modern Library editors are less helpful than they were above: "Man has a *single imperfection*, his *unity* is *defective*, because… he requires another being to multiply his image." The Son is the invisible God's "conspicuous" image, "Made visible" how (*PL* 3.385–86)? By declaration or by begetting? If the ability to beget progeny all by one's self distinguishes gods from men, then Satan also is a god, but that's not all that's at stake here. Adam also means that

being *single*, a unit, is perfection in God but a defect in Man. However, we already have seen that God is never alone; whether or not he *could* be complacent alone no one can say. Suffice it to say, that, like Adam, he begets an off-spring in his likeness, "his Image multipli'd." Nothing could be more godlike (or manlike?) than begetting.

Which brings us finally to the poem's articulation of human sexual difference. We already have seen that the foundations are unstable. The famous formulation "Hee for God only, shee for God in him," seems to draw a tight analogy between the God-Man relationship and the Man-Woman relationship (*PL* 4.299). The second is meant to subtend the first. But we cannot help but see the internal contradiction here. If God created the Man for Himself "only," then the Woman is superfluous. And God, we recall, allegedly distinguishes himself from Man by needing no one else. In what sense, then is Man "for God only"? The poem tries to found heteronormative sexual difference on the foundation of difference between God and Man, a foundation that we see already lies in ruins. (Indeed, Christianity depends on the ruin of this foundational distinction since Jesus Christ must be both God and Man in order to achieve atonement for humankind.) In *Tetrachordon*, Milton indicates that he already (sort of) knew Adam and Eve cannot possibly serve as the defining example of heteronormative marriage:

> That there was a neerer alliance between Adam and Eve, then could be ever after between man and wife, is visible to any. For no other woman was ever moulded out of her husbands rib, but of meer strangers for the most part they com to have that consanguinity which they have by wedlock. And if we look neerly upon the matter, though mariage be most agreeable to holines, to purity and justice, yet is it not a naturall, but a civill and ordain'd relation. (Yale Prose 2.601)

Looking more "neerly" on almost any matter having to do with doctrine-generating stories of origin will always produce significant slippage, intentional or not. No married couple has ever been like Adam and Eve, because no other wife was made out of her husband. Looked at more nearly the first married couple is a tangle of unnatural relations: Adam is Eve's mother and her brother; God is her father and grandfather; she is "Daughter of God and Man" (*PL* 4.660 and 9.291) and the many-times-great-grandmother of the Son of God. As Milton himself puts it, marriage since Adam and Eve is "not a naturall, but a civill and ordain'd

relation"; it is invented, constituted by civil or positive, not natural, law. And here we see how the constitutive categories of *natural* and *unnatural* switch sides, for the first couple was so literally natural in ways no subsequent couple can duplicate, that they appear, by standards of Christian morality, to be most assuredly unnatural!

This queer reading of *Paradise Lost* has certainly tried to be "inimical to the construction of categories of identity" even as it takes in hand a poem that tries to tell the stories of such constructions and defend them as eternal and true. God and Man, Man and Woman, natural and unnatural, first and pre-first, all these categories upon which the poem insists, prove far from true and far from eternal, let alone just. I close this essay with another example, this time from *Paradise Regain'd*, of how Milton's epic strains invite queer critical practices. The triumphant moment in Milton's brief epic is the moment when the Son stands and Satan (for the second, but not-quite-final time in his life) falls.[28]

> So Satan fell and strait a fiery Globe
> Of Angels on full sail of wing flew nigh,
> Who on their plumy Vans receiv'd him soft
> From his uneasie station, and upbore
> As on a floating couch through the blithe Air,
> Then in a flowry valley set him down
> On a green bank, and set before him spred
> A table of Celestial Food (*PR* 4.581–88)

Few editors fail to notice that the pronoun, *him*, in line 583, grammatically speaking, claims as its antecedent Satan, and they usually instruct us simply to correct what grammar would regard as already correct and supply instead, "the Son of God." Only one critic I know of spends much time unpacking the possibilities here—William Kerrigan in his 1983 book *The Sacred Complex*.[29] For him, these are psychoanalytic possibilities, but this grammatical detail also opens up possibilities for queer reading. Satan and his "Adversary" (line 527) occupy the same space designated by "him" in 583, and in the subsequent pronouns ("his" in 584, "him" in 586 and 587). The passage threatens to conflate the two beings both of Milton's epics have committed themselves to distinguishing from each other once and for all.[30] It also threatens to cast a backward shadow across this poem all the way to the banquet temptation, and even the baptismal announcement, "This is my Son" (1.85).

All of this raises the question of sonship, not only christologically, but also more troublingly by reminding us of some hard problematic kernels at the center of Christianity that resist understanding: why two gods? How did one beget the other? What space is there in heaven for woman, let alone heteronormative marriage?

A last word about intentions. In his *Areopagitica*, Milton comes closest to asserting the value of a critical practice that challenges received wisdom and doctrine all the way down to the ground. The strongest version of this appears when he asserts that "A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie" (Yale Prose 2.543). Statements like this (there's another one in *PR* 4.288–90) leave open the possibility of reading Milton himself as engaged in a kind of queer critical practice, eager to explode doctrine *qua* doctrine and rely instead on "light," whether from above or from within. There are times, he claims, many times, when our very embrace of truth makes that truth heretical: "The light which we have gain'd, was giv'n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge" (Yale Prose 2.550).

Notes

1. Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 19.
2. Carolyn Dinshaw, "Chaucer's Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer," *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1995): 75–92, 77.
3. Jacques Derrida's meditations on deconstruction and the logic of the supplement will inform the queer critical readings that follow. See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144ff.
4. I may be mistaken, but I think that Jonathan Goldberg obliquely refers to this when he observes that "Milton's poem is not a monologue and it is situated in a time that is not one. I could be tempted to call this queer time insofar as it opens up a set of incommensurate relations rather than the massive closures of republican time" assumed by the "republican" Miltonists he attacks. Milton's poem makes claims that try to ignore anything like a specific historical pressure; perhaps that is why his work can be read as suffering so keenly from its historical moment. See his "What

Dost Thou in This World?," Catharine Gray and Erin Murphy, eds., *Milton Now: Alternative Approaches and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 51–68, 64.

5. All quotations from Milton's poetry are from *The John Milton Reading Room*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon (Hanover, NH: Trustees of Dartmouth College, 1997–2017), http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/contents/text.shtml.
6. Marvell, "On *Paradise Lost*," in *The John Milton Reading Room*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon (Hanover, NH: Trustees of Dartmouth College, 1997–2017), http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/note/text.shtml.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 126, 132.
8. Stephen Guy-Bray, "'Fellowships of Joy': Angelic Union in *Paradise Lost*," *Early Modern Culture* 10 (2014): 14–23, 16. Available at https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol10/iss1/2.
9. The invocation to "holy light" in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* also equivocates between the first-ness of created light and the supplemental first-ness of an "Eternal Coeternal Beam" (*PL* 3.1–12).
10. I am grateful to Stephen Guy-Bray for suggesting this observation, and for reading an early draft of this essay.
11. William Empson did not call his approach to *Paradise Lost* queer reading, but I think it can well be understood as the first instance of a critical practice we now regard as queer. See *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).
12. The very title of Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* proclaims that he intends to rescue marriage and divorce "From the bondage of CANON LAW, and other mistakes, to the true meaning of Scripture in the Law and Gospel compar'd" (John Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 2 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], 221). Referred to subsequently as "Yale Prose." *Tetrachordon*'s entire purpose is to expound in painstaking detail on "The Foure Chiefe Places in Scripture Which Treat of Mariage, or Nullities in Mariage" (Yale Prose 2.586).
13. But see Milton's apparent belief that God took daily recreation with "the eternall wisdome, *dayly his delight, playing alwayes before him*," in *Tetrachordon* (Yale Prose 2.596–97).
14. For an extended discussion of marriage teaching in the Reformation, please see my *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 24–56.
15. See Marvell's "The Garden" and Stephen Guy-Bray's reading of the poem in "Animal, Vegetable, Sexual: Metaphor in John Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis' and Andrew Marvell's, 'The Garden,'" in *Sex before Sex:*

Figuring the Act in Early Modern England, ed. James Bromley and Will Stockton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 203–10.

16. Twice in the poem Eve is referred to as "Daughter of God and Man" (*PL* 4.660 and 9.291).
17. See my "'How Human Life Began': Sexual Reproduction in Book 8 of *Paradise Lost*," in *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed. James Bromley and Will Stockton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 263–90.
18. I will set aside, for now, the problem of sevens and twos raised by reading Genesis 7. There God appears to make a distinction between "clean" beasts whom Noah is directed to collect "by sevens" and unclean beasts for whom just a couple, "male and female," is sufficient (Genesis 7:2–3). God says nothing here about the fish and other sea creatures since a flood will not threaten them. Noah (and the narrator) appears to ignore the business of "sevens" (verses 8–9). Genesis also invites queer reading practices.
19. See also the address to Urania that begins *PL* 7: "Before the Hills appeerd, or Fountain flow'd/ Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst converse/ Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play/ In the presence of th' Almightie Father, pleas'd/ With thy Celestial Song" (8–12).
20. It may be worth noting here that there's some logic to Adam's over-valuation of Eve. If she was created expressly to remedy his lack, it makes sense that she would appear to him as "in her self compleat" (*PL* 8.548). And, as the remedy for Adam's loneliness, may we assume she is not herself lonely?
21. Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 116.
22. Though Adam here reports a conversation he had with God *prior* to his conversation with Raphael about "one first matter," it stands to reason that his report of the earlier conversation is now informed by what he has learned from Raphael.
23. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen Fallon, eds., *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), note to *PL* 8.421. Referred to throughout as the Modern Library Edition.
24. Pliny, *Letters*, 2 vols., trans. William Melmoth, rev. W. M. L. Hutchison (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 2.267.
25. Again, thanks to Stephen Guy-Bray for suggesting I think a bit more about "numbers absolute."
26. Please see my extended discussion of Psalm 2:7 in *Literal Figures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68–76.

27. For more detailed discussion of the history of interpreting Psalm 2:7, see S. J. Mitchell Dahood, trans. and ed., *Psalms I: The Anchor Bible*, vol. 16 (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965), 7.
28. See Jonathan Goldberg's brilliant reading of this moment in "What Dost Thou in This World?," 62.
29. William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
30. One of my students recently pointed out to me that a similar effect troubles the invocation to Book 3, where phrases like "Escap't the *Stygian* Pool," "bolder wing," and "my flight / Through utter and through middle darkness borne" inevitably impress us as images of Satan before we correct them to images of a Dantéesque narrator (*PL* 3.13–16).