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"Lycidas": The Pastoral Elegy as Same-Sex Epithalamium

BRUCE BOEHRER

WHILE MILTON'S WORK IN GENERAL HAS LONG BEEN famous for its sexual instability, "Lycidas" in particular has received little attention on this score. Women have found *Paradise Lost* alternately liberating and oppressive, scholars have declared the poet's views on marriage and divorce simultaneously progressive and dictatorial, and readers have registered the contrast between Milton's youthful reputation as the Lady of Christ's and his later fear of "effeminate slackness."¹ Yet through it all, "Lycidas" has remained a poem primarily about other things: about pastoral convention, about the politics of Puritanism, about the literary vocation and Milton's career anxieties.² While not denying the importance of these issues to an understanding of Milton's English elegy, I argue here for the poem's significance as erotic fantasy. In broad terms, I will suggest that Milton's use of sources in "Lycidas" leads to a peculiarly disembodied, and distinctly homoerotic, sense of sexual cathexis. In the process, I will advance the following interlinked propositions: that "Lycidas" juxtaposes elegiac and matrimonial references in a way that requires further study; that this juxtaposition allows Milton to mediate between Christian and pagan literary traditions so as to emphasize the discomfort with feminine sexuality occasionally present in each; and that this emphasis generates a parallel fantasy of male-male affective and literary bonding that lies behind the epithalamic tone of Milton's concluding lines.

The first of these arguments (tracing the presence of an epithalamic register in the language of "Lycidas") has already been mapped out in part by other scholars—notably Michael Lieb (53–75) and Stella Revard (162–200), in work to which the present essay is deeply indebted. Yet this argument also demands some reevaluation with respect to the broad context of the pre-Miltonic pastoral elegy. My second and third argu-

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ments are to the best of my knowledge new in their application to “Lycidas.” They nonetheless owe much to recent work in early modern queer studies that pursues two parallel lines of inquiry: examination (à la Bredbeck [187–23] and Rambuss) of the homoerotics of early modern devotional verse and consideration (as in Smith [225–70] and Goldberg [63–101]) of the masculine intimacy engendered by coterie readership and literary allusion. I believe that these fields of study may be united in “Lycidas,” which combines devotional poetics with a richly allusive verse texture that tends to foreground patterns of masculine emotional attachment.

At the least, masculine attachment is writ large in Milton’s elegy. Same-sex affect permeates the singer’s description of his idyllic past with Lycidas, a description that at one point almost takes the form of an aubade (“Together both, ere the high Lawns appear’d / Under the opening eye-lids of the morn / We drove afield” [94–107; lines 25–27]); likewise, the ensuing lament for Lycidas is framed in language appropriate to erotic loss (“But O the heavy change now thou art gon, / Now thou art gon, and never must return!” [37–38]); and the same lament culminates in no less a model for such loss than the tale of Orpheus, to which I will return later (“What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore, / [. . .] Whom Universal nature did lament” [58, 60]). In similar fashion, the devotional aspect of Milton’s poem carries a trace of the erotic, perhaps inevitably so, given the intersection of amatory and spiritual vocabularies in early modern pastoral. Most prominently, for instance, this intersection leads Milton to worry about “the tangles of *Neaera’s* hair” (69), with their ever-present distraction from the more serious business of herding sheep. Here again Milton’s poem seems to be as much about love as about death, so that the elegy’s double focus on matters of personal attachment and devotional commitment repeatedly distills into the forms and language of erotic, and indeed matrimonial, celebration. Hence my overall argument: by effecting this combination of

the devotional and the personal, 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. The result is a poem that celebrates the union of a wide variety of apparently incompatible terms—God and humanity, agape and eros, classical and Christian literary sensibilities, tradition and the individual talent, John Milton and various precursor poets, and so forth—while expressing a distinct ambivalence about the presence of women.

[I]

The scant notice the erotic valence of “Lycidas” has received seems little short of bizarre, given the lengthy association of pastoral verse with amatory, even homoerotic, subject matter. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this association had become so marked that, according to Gregory Bredbeck, “one of [pastoral’s] primary interests is its participation in fields of sexual deviation” (200). To support this claim, Bredbeck adduces such works as Braithwait’s second eclogue, Spenser’s January eclogue, and Barnfield’s “The Affectionate Shepherd,” works whose investment in male-male sexuality can be traced to the homoerotic eclogues of Theocritus and Vergil (Bredbeck 149–51, 200–03). To this extent we may view the English pastoral of Milton’s day not only as a site for erotic exploration but also as a point of erotic contact with the literature of Greece and Rome. If, as Bruce Smith has remarked, “Latin was [. . .] the private language of male sexual desire” in Renaissance England, then the Latinated gestures and resonances of “Lycidas” need to be read in terms of that language and the desire it presupposes (84). One needs, in short, an erotics of the poem’s sources.

Those sources are of course many, but present purposes lead straight to a relatively neglected one: Jacopo Sannazaro’s first piscatorial eclogue. This poem’s probable influence on Milton was originally noted a century ago by James Holly Hanford:

What must have attracted Milton to this poem [. . .] is [. . .] the circumstance that the lament is for one who had met death by drowning. The closest parallel to *Lycidas* is to be found in the passage in the Latin work in which the shepherd hails the departed spirit wherever it may be and bids it look towards its former home [. . .]. It is interesting to note, too, that Sannazaro as well as Milton mentions the name of the not very familiar nymph Panope. These resemblances are too striking to be the result of accident. (46–47)

In the years since Hanford first advanced this argument, scholars have accepted it almost without reservation or emendation. Thus, for instance, it reappears unchanged in the *Variorum Commentary* on "Lycidas" (Woodhouse and Bush 558), in scholarly discussions of the poem by Louis Martz (63–64, 319n7) and Watson Kirkconnell (188), and in critical editions such as those by John Carey (237) and Roy Flannagan (Milton, *Riverside* 97).

Indeed, Michael Lieb is practically alone in adding to Hanford's account the specific literary detail with which this present essay is preoccupied: the common concern of Sannazaro's and Milton's elegies with the celebration of wedlock (69).³ In Milton's poem, this concern gains climactic expression when the uncouth narrator imagines the drowned Lycidas as arisen

Through the dear might of him that walk'd the
waves:
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With *Nectar* pure his oozy Lock's he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptiall Song,
In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.
(173–77)

As for Sannazaro's first piscatory, it contrasts strikingly with Milton's later poem through its evocation of an anticipated earthly union frustrated by untimely death:

For why should I, alas, in my wretchedness desire a life in regions lonely without Phyllis, or what could I consider sweet when my light is taken away? [. . .] Yea, shall I celebrate these

marriage rites, these happy hymeneals? Is it thus that Venus gives me the joys of the marriage I longed for? Thus does Lucina offer ambiguous fears?
(lines 51–59)

Here, in a poem already renowned for its similarities to "Lycidas," we find an almost perfectly inverted anticipation of the matrimonial theme rehearsed in Milton's elegy: an expected earthly union disrupted by death, as opposed to an unforeseen celestial union enabled by death. Such differences, I believe, are heightened by the implied homoerotic troping of Milton's nuptial song.

This contrast gains further resonance when viewed against the broad tradition of the pre-Miltonic pastoral elegy, in which matrimonial references of the sort rehearsed above are conspicuously scarce. On this point I must respectfully disagree with Lieb's prior work, which presents the reference to wedlock in "Lycidas" as typifying "the epithalamic qualities that pastoral elegy comes to assume" by Milton's day (69). For Lieb the amatory tropes in "Lycidas" presuppose the institution of Christian matrimony, which supersedes the sexual practices of pagan antiquity while framing itself, in Milton's own later formulation, as an object of God's "delight," "wherein [he may] be worshiped" and "glorified" (*Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* [926–76] 1.13). Yet while I share Lieb's sense that marriage lies at the erotic center of "Lycidas," I do not share his extension of the matrimonial focus to Milton's sources and antecedents. Unnecessarily concerned to locate a conventional "nuptial dimension" in the earlier pastoral elegy (68), Lieb tends to overstate the importance of the wedlock motif to Milton's precursors.⁴ But any broad assessment of the pastoral elegiac tradition before Milton will demonstrate that the combination of epicedium and epithalamium is strikingly rare. To focus, for instance, on the twenty-five most prominent pre-Miltonic pastoral elegies: there are no direct references to wedlock—*pace* Lieb—in Theocritus's only pastoral elegy (idyll 1); in Moschus's *Lament for Bion*; in the two pastoral elegies by Vergil (ec-

logues 5 and 10); in the unique one by Nemesian (eclogue 1); in the two by Petrarch (poems 2 and 14 in *Bucolicum Carmen*); in Castiglione's *Alcon*; in Marot's complaint for Louise de Savoy; in the elegiac lament from Ronsard's *Bergerie dédiée à [. . .] la Royne d'Escosse* (97–101; lines 419–510); in either of the elegies on Walter and Clere Haddon composed by Giles Fletcher the Elder and printed in the 1576 *Poemata* of Haddon père (Haddon 270–74, 281–83); in either Thomas Watson's "Meliboeus" (101–42) or his "Eclogue upon the Death of the Right Honorable Sir Francis Walsingham" (143–56); in either Spenser's November eclogue from *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1–56) or his "Astrophel" (699–703); in any of the apparently non-Spenserian elegies for Philip Sidney first published along with "Astrophel";⁵ or in William Drummond's lament for Henry, prince of Wales, entitled "Tears on the Death of Moeliades." As for the full list of 102 sources and antecedents for "Lycidas" enumerated by Kirkconnell (79–245), only a few of these works deal with marriage in any way, and scarcely any of them focus on the ceremony of wedlock.⁶

The conjunction of dirge and marriage appears to be almost as irregular for the pastoral tradition as for the world of *Hamlet*. Thus, it is particularly interesting that Milton not only conjures up the matrimonial association in "Lycidas" but also returns to it, two years later, in the final lines of his "Epitaphium Damonis" (236–44):⁷

But you, Damon, be present after the rites of Heaven are received. [. . .] Because your youth was without blame, because you never married, likewise the honors of virginity are retained for you; you yourself, with head encircled with a shining crown and carrying the happy palmfronds, will forever take part in the marriage-celebration; where song joined with the harp rage in blessed dance, and orgies like those of Bacchus under the Thyrsus of Sion. (lines 207–19)

As John Shawcross has pointed out, this passage of consolation is replete with "sexual meaning," which invests its setting (a celestial "bower of

bliss"), its "association of 'bowers' with 'marriage,'" and even the poet's diction (33–36). When considered alongside the conclusion to "Lycidas," this passage suggests that the association of funeral with wedding held a peculiar charge for Milton, and this point is underscored by the rarity of similar associations in the work of the poet's precursors. By combining death and matrimony, Milton engages in a selective pastoral echoing, neither wholly alien nor wholly intrinsic to the poetic tradition in which he participates; he generates what we might call an unconventional convention.

Apart from Sannazaro's first piscatory, only two major pre-Miltonic pastoral elegies juxtapose the funerary and nuptial motifs explicitly, and the poems' means of doing so reflect contrasting religious sensibilities. The poems, Bion's "Lament for Adonis" and the fourteenth eclogue of Boccaccio's *Bucolicum Carmen*, could scarcely be more dissimilar in their use of epithalamic imagery. For Bion, the matter of nuptial celebration appears bitterly in a lament for Aphrodite's lost "husband" (line 68), Adonis, whom the wedding torches ironically conduct not to his wife but rather to the couch of death:

The Wedding-God hath put out every torch before the door, and scattered the bridal garland upon the ground; the burden of his song is no more "Ho for the Wedding;" there's more of "Woe" and "Adonis" to it than ever there was of the wedding-cry. (89–92)

Although these lines appear at the end of Bion's elegy, in the spot conventionally reserved for passages of consolation, there is nothing consoling about this reference to marriage. On the contrary, it calculatedly accentuates the sense of desolation that the poem's complaint is designed to convey, and thus it supplies an obvious model for Sannazaro's later, similarly desolate reference to "happy hymeneals."

For Boccaccio, in contrast, matrimonial reference assumes a consolatory tone similar to that which it will exhibit in Milton's two pastoral

elegies. Writing on the death of his daughter Violante (renamed Olympia in the eclogue), Boccaccio envisions her returning to earth to comfort her father with the glad news of her Christian redemption. This news she presents in matrimonial form; having ascended a mountain, she is greeted by her grandfather, who welcomes her with the exhortation

Have you come, our Silvius' dearest offspring?
Now let us sing "Come, bride of Lebanon"
And sacred wedding hymns, and you, my
 grandchild,
Do honor to the mother of the groom. [. . .]
[. . .] My daughter, here
You'll join our holy chorus and enjoy
Your spouse in everlasting marriage.

(lines 234–40)

Thus, Boccaccio's eclogue concludes, like "Lycidas" roughly three hundred years later, with a celestial wedding that compensates for the brevity of an unfulfilled earthly existence. When Olympia's father first encounters her, he exclaims, "You look / grown up enough for marriage, o my daughter" (63), and the poem's end then rewrites Violante's by retroactively using the trope of Christian rebirth to translate epicedium into epithalamium. Despite Milton's obvious affinities for Sannazaro and for Bion (whom he mentions by name at the beginning of the "Epitaphium Damonis" [2]), Boccaccio more clearly anticipates the theme of wedlock as it is rehearsed in "Lycidas." As we shall see, this point holds certain consequences for any reading of Milton's poem that attends particularly to matters of love and marriage.

[II]

It is commonplace to view Sannazaro's eclogues from the standpoint of "the humanistic art of close imitation," as works whose classicism "tends rather to replace than to clothe Christian sentiment."⁸ This view of Sannazaro's verse helps to explain the tonal similarities of the wed-

ding references in piscatory 1 and the "Lament for Adonis"; Sannazaro's poem is an exercise in what W. Leonard Grant has called the "*classicizing pastoral*," a form whose principal objective lies in emulation rather than innovation (117). By contrast, Boccaccio's *Bucolicum Carmen*, poem 14, locates itself squarely among the "*new uses of pastoral*"—many of them devotional—which Grant traces from the late Middle Ages onward and which thus arose concurrently with the humanist enthusiasm for imitating classical pastoral models. Hence, Milton's invocation of the matrimonial theme in "Lycidas" is not only a rare move in the overall pastoral tradition but also a move that signifies in the vocabularies both of classicizing and of devotional pastoral.

This aspect of Milton's wedding theme suits a poem whose formal allegiances are as divided as those of "Lycidas." Neither a purely classicizing nor a purely innovative eclogue, "Lycidas" displays elements of both pastoral modes, concomitant with its investment in the Graeco-Roman and the Christian literary traditions. This duality contributes to the irregularities of voice that constitute a standard focus of "Lycidas" criticism and fuels commentary on the relative status of classical and Christian inspiration in the Milton canon.⁹ The poet's reference in "Lycidas" to a heavenly "nuptial song," for example, begs to be read as a triumph of Christianity over paganism, an opportunity for the Christian muse to have the last word in a song of classical derivation. Thus, David Quint can characterize Milton's overall literary career in terms of a "Puritan rejection [. . .] of Renaissance syncretism" (213); Revard can observe, "[I]t is a specifically 'Christian' wedding song that Lycidas will hear" (185); and Lieb can argue that "because *Lycidas* is a poem that embodies the Christian perspective, [. . .] it necessarily transcends the amatory environment of pagan pastoral from which it is drawn" (73).

In revisiting this view of matters, I do not wish to contest the sensible claim that Milton's verse asserts the superiority of Christian literary

inspiration to its pagan counterpart. However, it may be more helpful to think of the relation between the poem's Christian and classical sources in terms other than those of outright conflict and incompatibility. Thus, despite the poem's Christian consolation, Annabel Patterson has described it as an "overt homage to Virgil's first eclogue" (158), while Rosemond Tuve has claimed, of the conjunction of classical and Christian themes in "Lycidas," that "there would be some truth in saying that the Middle Ages made of classical literature one great old testament, for the New Dispensation is with little sense of displacement read in the figures of an older, shadowed truth" (109). In considering the wedding motif in "Lycidas," I propose to take such assertions at face value.

If we do so, we achieve a more complex view of Lycidas's nuptial song than the standard commentary offers us. That commentary almost exclusively traces the wedding allusion to two passages from scripture, Revelation 14.2–5 and Revelation 19.6–9, whose elision accounts for the two definitive elements of Milton's consolation.¹⁰ On one hand, Revelation 14 is all about the "unexpressive [. . .] song" with which the elect honor God:

I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps. And they sung as it were a new song before the throne [. . .]: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.

(*Holy Bible*, Rev. 14.2–4)

The song here is not explicitly nuptial; for this element of the Miltonic reference we must turn to Revelation 19, with its description of the marriage of the Lamb: "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude [. . .] saying [. . .] Let us be glad and rejoice [. . .]; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (19.6–7). Thus, the ideas that the song is unutterable and that it accompanies a

wedding are traditionally derived from scriptural passages in which the two characteristics appear exclusive of each other.

These scriptural passages can be taken as informing a Miltonic consolation that supersedes and corrects earlier patterns of classical amatory reference in "Lycidas." After all, "Lycidas" is a poem full of allusions to unrequited love, attempted rape, and broken nuptials. It insists on conjuring up for its readers such pagan spectacles as that of Echo pining for Narcissus ("Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves, / [. . .] / And all their echoes mourn" [39–41]); of Alpheus pursuing Arethusa ("O fountain *Arethuse*" [85]; "Return *Alpheus*, the dread voice is past" [132]); of Apollo lamenting the dead Hyacinthus ("That sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe" [106]); and, most important, of Orpheus mourning Eurydice ("What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore, / The Muse herself, for her enchanting son" [58–59]). Indeed, when viewed from a certain perspective, "Lycidas" may appear to be one long catalog of failed classical love affairs, love affairs for which the "unexpressive nuptial song" of Christian redemption provides the sovereign corrective (see esp. Lieb 71–73).

However, if one places the classicism of "Lycidas" in a typological rather than a purely antagonistic relation to the poem's Christian consolation, a different picture emerges—one in which Christian redemption offers the satisfactory fulfillment to a set of pagan amatory aspirations that are for various reasons incapable of fulfilling themselves and thus appear not as the antithesis to the poem's heavenly marriage but as its incomplete anticipation. This view of matters requires us to reexamine Milton's use of scriptural sources and his placement of those sources alongside classical allusions, for the argument that "Lycidas" rejects classical love for a Christian nuptial song proceeds, in effect, from source to structure: Milton's heavenly wedding is drawn from scripture, replaces earlier images of sexual union drawn from classical

sources, and therefore must signal the rejection of those sources and the sexual ethos they embody. So the argument goes.

But the literary background to Milton's nuptial-song reference, while certainly scriptural, does not by any means therefore constitute a wholesale rejection of classical literary conventions or the erotic sensibility they presuppose. As Joseph Wittreich has observed, "[T]he crossing of pagan and Christian canons" entails a "crossing or mixing of genres" such that "a form here, and its perspective, may complement or augment [. . .] a form there, and its very different perspective" (*Poetics* 122). The matrimonial theme in "Lycidas" illustrates this point nicely, for we have already noted that the wedding theme in the pastoral elegy, rare as it is, nonetheless finds different sorts of precedent in classical and Christian sources. And as for Milton's two references to Revelation, they are, if anything, extraordinarily amenable to classical appropriation. The wedding of the Lamb in Revelation 19, for instance, is only one instance of that broad and venerable scriptural metaphor whereby the Christian church is figured as the bride of Christ; in adapting this metaphor, Milton could have referred equally to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25.1–13, or to John the Baptist's declaration that "[h]e that hath the bride is the bridegroom" (John 3.29), or to Ephesians 5.25 ("Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church"), or even to the Song of Solomon.¹¹ Abstract as these figurations may be (and some are more abstract than others), they lend themselves easily to the erotic register of classical pastoral; the Song of Solomon, for instance, was reworked as a neo-Latin eclogue by Gian Anisio of Naples in the early sixteenth century (Grant 273). And if scripture can thus be reformatted as amatory eclogue, it is equally possible to read the classical erotic tradition as Christian metaphor: to see in the judgment of Paris an echo of the temptation in Eden (as does the *Ovide Moralisé* [qtd. in Mulryan 49]) or to consider the rape of Ganymede an il-

lustration of Jesus's declaration "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (as does Claude Mignault in 1618 [qtd. in Barkan 26]).

This is not to deny Milton's investment in a Christian euhemerist tradition that casts classical polytheism as a demonic falsehood. However, this euhemerist agenda is complicated by the mythographic details that inform and enable it. Milton's conflation of the two passages from Revelation offers a case in point, for whereas Revelation 19 supplies Milton with the metaphor of the wedding of the Lamb, Revelation 14 gives him the idea of an "unexpressive" heavenly anthem sung by an exclusive choir of men "not defiled with women." This idea reacts unpredictably with the matrimonial context of Revelation 19, suggesting a longing for connubial union and an equal distaste for its customary heteroerotic articulation. This distaste, in turn, manifests itself on the level of the poem's overall structure, for while "Lycidas" shares its matrimonial imagery with the work of Sannazaro, Boccaccio, and Bion, it differs signally from these precursors in admitting no specific woman to its bridal party. Lycidas, "entertained" in heaven by the ungendered collectivity of the "Saints" (178), "hears the unexpressive nuptial song,"¹² which suggests that he is not singing it, which suggests in turn that he may be in the bridal position, which of course is the position explicitly occupied, on a similar occasion, by the Olympia of Boccaccio. Moreover, this placement of Lycidas at the altar is further enhanced by the long-standing tendency of epithalamic verse to depict the bride of the moment as the principal auditor of wedding songs and poetry composed in her honor; Catullus, for instance, exhorts the bride Vinia to "come forth now newly wedded, if it seems fitting, and hear our song" ("Prodeas noua nupta, si / iam uidetur, et audias / nostra uerba" [61.92–94; my trans.]), while Spenser, in "Epithalamion" (735–40), declares of his own bride:

Bring her up to th'high altar, that she may
The sacred ceremonies there partake
[.]

The whiles with hollow throates
 The choristers the joyous antheme sing.
 (lines 195–201)

But in “Lycidas” this conventional epithalamic gesture occurs without a woman at its center. Indeed, “Lycidas” is famous for the absence of the actual love of women; the poem rejects the shady “sport” offered by “*Amaryllis*” and “*Neaera*” as inimical to “the homely slighted Shepherds trade” (68–69, 65).¹³

In the event, one can encounter a similar rejection in yet another of Milton’s sources, Phineas Fletcher’s *Piscatorie Eclogues*. Fletcher, like Milton, is committed to classical form and to Christian substance, and, again like Milton, he accommodates the latter to the former through the amatory vocabulary of pastoral. The result is intriguing in its development of homoerotic themes, which recast Christian agape in the image of Vergil’s second eclogue. Fletcher’s first piscatory, for instance, foregrounds the unrequited love of the “poore fisher-swain” Thelgon (2.1) for the haughty Amyntas:

Liv[ing] a while with *Calydonian* swains [. . .]
 My life with fair *Amyntas* there I led:
Amyntas fair, whom still my sore heart plains.
 Yet seem’d he then to love, as he was loved;
 But (ah!) I fear, true love his high heart never
 proved. (13.3–7)

Eclogue 3, for its part, counters this passion with the love of the boy Chromis for the “Prince of fishers” (6.3), while in the sixth eclogue Thirsil combines earthly and heavenly same-sex love in the following advice to Thomalin, who is smitten by the beauteous nymph Melite:

Raise [. . .] thy prostrate love with trowning thought;
 And clog it not in chains, and prison here:
 The God of fishers dear thy love hath bought:
 Most dear he loves: for shame, love thou as deare.
 Next, love thou there, where best thy love is
 sought;
 My self, or els some other fitting peer.
 Ah might thy love with me for ever dwell!

Why should’st thou hate thy heav’n, and love
 thy hell? (24.1–8)

Here, at least, same-sex companionship provides a specific physical counterpart to the spiritual wedding of the Lamb, a companionship troped as superior to and exclusive of Thomalin’s heteroerotic preoccupations.

As for the apparent rejection in “Lycidas” of Graeco-Roman eroticism, the poem’s preeminent classical allusion points directly to yet another model of same-sex union, one that was read approvingly by Renaissance mythographers as an emblem of sexual restraint. I refer, of course, to the myth of Orpheus, which figures so broadly in the Milton canon as to have occasioned endless comment.¹⁴ In the Ovidian source, this tale displays several features that make it relevant to “Lycidas.” Bitten by a serpent at her wedding (Ovid 10.8–10), Eurydice supplies an excellent model for the conjunction of nuptial celebration and funeral obsequies that Milton’s elegy foregrounds; as a primordial figure for the inspired poet, Orpheus embodies the notion of “unexpressive [. . .] song” and situates that song in the afterlife through his bravura musical performance for Hades; and when Orpheus dies he is finally allowed to consummate the nuptials whose fruition eluded him in life: “The poet’s shade fled beneath the earth, and recognized all the places he had seen before; and, seeking through the blessed fields, found Eurydice and caught her in his eager arms” (11.61–64). Here, more than in Bion or Sannazaro, one may find a classical precedent for the nuptial consolation rehearsed in “Lycidas.”

But the piece of the Orpheus legend most essential to Milton’s elegy is the story of the poet’s death, a story to which Milton’s verse refers explicitly:

What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore,
 [.]
 When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
 His goary visage down the stream was sent,
 Down the swift *Hebrus* to the *Lesbian* shore.
 (58–63)

Orpheus's dismemberment by the Bacchantes may well serve for Milton as an emblem of the "range and limits" of "the poet's powers" (Du Rocher 70), but to the Bacchantes Orpheus represents the uncompromising rejection of heteroerotic love; they murder him because he is an insult to their sex. As Ovid explains, after the loss of Eurydice

Orpheus had shunned all love of womankind, whether because of his ill success in love, or whether he had given his troth once for all. Still, many women felt a passion for the bard; many grieved for their love repulsed. He set the example for the people of Thrace of giving his love to tender boys, and enjoying the springtime and first flower of their youth. (10.78–85)

Thus, Ovid ascribes Orpheus's death to the jealousy of sexually rebuffed women, and the mythographic tradition follows suit by repeatedly figuring Orpheus's preference for boys as the exercise of virtue. Thomas Walsingham, for one, remarks:

By Orpheus, we are to understand discretion coupled with eloquence and by the women who attack him, the soft and effeminate qualities that always assail the wise. Therefore the women (i.e., the lustful) killed Orpheus (i.e., the wise man) because he loved young men (i.e., the virtuous). (my trans.)

Per Orpheum debemus intelligere discretionem cum eloquentia. Per mulieres illum impugnantes molles et effeminatos qui semper sapientes impugnant. Mulieres itaque, id est luxuriosi, Orpheum, id est sapientem, occiderunt quia mares, id est virtuosos, amabat. (160)

Pierre Bersuire goes further, presenting Orpheus as a type of the minister of the gospel:

Orpheus signifies the preacher and minister of songs of the divine word. [. . .] He must flee union with women and thoroughly abhor the embraces of the flesh and preach against their vices. (my trans.)

Orpheus significat predicatore[m] & diuini verbi carminu[m] dictatore[m]. [. . .] Mulieru[m] copula[m] debet fugere & carnis amplexus penitus exhorreere & co[n]tra ipsaru[m] malicias p[re]dicare. (K1v)

And in the commentary to his great translation of the *Metamorphoses*, George Sandys takes the same line:

The Thracian Bacchides [. . .] frantically invade the life of their Prophet for the contempt of their sex; avoided as a hinderance to the study of philosophy, & administration of ciuill affairs: he esteeming the propagation of wisdom & virtuous endeavours, more noble and immortal than that of posterity. (387)

In short, far from embodying a sexual ethos that Christianity must transcend, Orpheus generally serves for early modern readers as a figure of virtue, wisdom, and even sanctity, prefiguring rather than opposing the ministry of "him that walk'd the waves." Given Orpheus's prominence in the allusive context of "Lycidas," it thus becomes difficult to regard that context merely as an amatory environment to be discarded by the poem's Christian consolation. On the contrary, the thing that makes the Orpheus myth attractive for Christian mythographers is its aversion to feminine sexual contact, and we have already seen that the scriptural allusions behind Milton's nuptial-song reference express a similar antipathy to feminine defilement and a similar association of transcendent song with abstinence from heteroerotic intercourse. But—to stay with the Orpheus myth for a moment—this association leads to a peculiar consequence. For if Orpheus's virtue is defined through his avoidance of contact with women, what then of his reunion with Eurydice in the afterlife? Does it not violate the spirit in which his tale may be read as a moral exemplum? The mythographers do not dwell on this point; but if the consolation of "Lycidas" rejects its classical pre-text in any way, it does so by constructing a scene of heavenly matrimony that offers no express vision of heteroerotic fulfillment.

So in “Lycidas” (as in the “Epitaphium Damonis”) Milton introduces a matrimonial theme with conspicuously scarce antecedents in the pastoral elegy; while doing so, the poet revises his few antecedents by removing any overt reference to women from the matrimonial context and by implying instead that Lycidas occupies the position of the bride; the matrimonial theme of Milton’s poem refers to two scriptural texts that between them voice a celebratory attitude toward marriage and a concurrent aversion to feminine defilement; this aversion to feminine defilement is also central to mythographic interpretations of the poem’s preeminent figure for pagan poetic inspiration, Orpheus; and the pagan and Christian uses of amatory discourse also combine to generate marked homoerotic overtones in at least one acknowledged source for “Lycidas,” Fletcher’s *Piscatorie Eclogues*. Thus, I would venture that the formulations of spiritual and literary exaltation in “Lycidas” involve a significant element of same-sex erotic cathexis, brought to bear on the metaphoric and literal institution of marriage. This is not to argue that Milton is a gay poet or that “Lycidas” is a gay poem—as if any such argument were possible, given the anachronistic character of terms like *gay* and *homosexual*.¹⁵ Instead, one might simply note that the poem gives voice in various ways to a range of differing sexual subject positions and that in the process Milton’s efforts to imagine the company of the elect in heaven—and the company of poets on earth—involve a substantial same-sex erotic charge. This last point demands further attention.

[III]

Writing on questions of authorship in that celebrated pre-Miltonic pastoral dirge “The Doleful Lay of Clorinda,” Jonathan Goldberg challenges not only the poem’s traditional ascription either to Edmund Spenser or to Mary Herbert, countess of Pembroke, but also the less traditional suggestion (advanced by William Oram in the Yale edition of Spenser’s minor poems) that the

text represents a collaboration between the two authors (Goldberg 84–101). Goldberg objects that the collaborative model solves problems of authorial ascription “by translating [the act of composition] into a Christian marriage, two hands joined in one” (96). Insisting instead that “the difference between Spenser’s hand and the countess’s is entirely indeterminate” (95), Goldberg argues that the metaphor of marriage simply will not resolve a textual problem whose conditions escape the gender differentiation such a metaphor inevitably presupposes. Since, for Goldberg, there is nothing intrinsically feminine about Herbert’s hand and nothing intrinsically masculine about Spenser’s, collaboration between the two authors cannot be properly understood in terms of a marriage that is grounded on “the normative differentiation that writes man and woman as an oppositional pair” (96).

This argument is relevant to “Lycidas” for at least two reasons: first, because “Lycidas” self-consciously invokes the idea of literary production (“unexpressive [. . .] song”) in a matrimonial context and, second, because that context seems strangely determined to escape the heteronormativity of Christian marriage. Perhaps in this case (although it is not one I would want to generalize to Spenser’s Yale editors) we are confronting a model of marriage that does not—at least not entirely—presuppose the essentialized opposition of man to woman. In discussing the sodomitic implications of Milton’s use of sexuality in *Paradise Regained*, Bredbeck has insisted that the poem’s “genderization [does not] accept [. . .] such easy meanings as ‘Man,’ ‘Woman,’ or, even, ‘buggerer.’ [. . .] Rather, the text encodes a system of plural options [. . .] that ascribes a certain sexual potentiality to everything from ‘fair women’ to ‘tall stripling youths’” (230). The “nuptial song” of “Lycidas,” with its homoerotic overtones, suggests that for Milton the idea of marital union, too, may admit a range of sexual potentialities.

As for the exact scope of these potentialities, there may be no better index to the extreme

breadth and lability of Milton's erotic vocabulary than the critical reactions it has occasioned. Thus, on one hand, readers like C. S. Lewis have been notoriously disturbed by the apparent "homosexual promiscuity" of Milton's heaven (112): a place (if place it might be called) that seems to admit free amorous intercourse among all its inhabitants, a place that Adam understands to be peopled entirely with "Spirits Masculine," a place where copulation is not essential to reproductivity, a place presided over by a God in whose "Hyacinthin" image Adam has been made (*Paradise Lost* 10.890, 4.301). Yet, on the other hand, readers like Richard Rambuss can remark on the sexual aridity of Milton's verse:

Milton's recasting of [devotional topics] not only drains them of much of their potential for erotic cathexis, [it] also strikingly *decorporealizes* them. In Milton's devotional corpus Christ appears hardly to have a body at all. Coincident with that absence, Milton himself hardly seems like a devotional poet. (134)

These two strong readers, considering Milton from entirely different ideological perspectives, seem to encounter entirely different work in the process; whereas Lewis frets over a perceived excess of sexual potential in the Milton canon, Rambuss laments its absence. It is not my purpose to contest either of these viewpoints. On the contrary, I believe that the marital theme in "Lycidas" provokes such contrasting critical reactions by locating erotic cathexis in a specifically decorporealized self: a Lycidas dead and bodiless, lost at sea, whose arrival into heaven thus frames itself as an ecstatic evaporation like the angelic lovemaking in *Paradise Lost*.

So if, for Milton, sex does not happen—at least not primarily—in the body, where does it happen? To judge by the poet's investment of energy in matters discursive, it happens in the head, in the translation of sexual intercourse into "textual intercourse." The latter phrase, of Jeffrey Masten's coinage, serves among other things to describe the "mode of homoerotic tex-

tual production" that Masten identifies in early modern English collaborative playwriting (60), and thus it may be appropriate to an elegy whose climactic nuptial song is described as both "unexpressive" and collective. For Masten, as for most scholars sympathetic to poststructuralist and new bibliographic theory, "the production of texts is a social process" that is inherently collaborative, one in which "modes of collective reading and writing are inscribed in particularly historical discourses of sex" (20, 61). For "Lycidas," I believe that the discursive inscription in question presupposes a Christian marital idealism that abstracts the individual from his and especially her corporeal self so as to accommodate anxieties regarding physical "defile[ment] with women."

A parallel act of collaborative inscription characterizes the language whereby the practices of coterie authorship and humanist education construct for themselves ideal communities of readers in early modern Europe. Thus, Smith has observed that "the listener to the confessions recorded in Shakespeare's sonnets [. . .] is a collaborator" in the work rather than a disinterested adjudicator of its value (233); likewise, Goldberg's analysis of the "Lay of Clorinda" presupposes a coterie mutuality such that "Spenser could write his final letter to Sidney [. . .] only by writing in his sister's hand" (85). As for the dynamics of humanist education, a body of scholarship deriving from Walter Ong's early work on Latin language study has explored the ways whereby early modern pedagogy could create a sense of closed same-sex community—an "*esprit de corps*"—through "transition rites" conducted "in an all-male extrafamilial environment" (130).¹⁶ Most recently, Alan Stewart has emphasized the extent to which such pedagogy "is figured [. . .] in opposition to notions of marriage and dynastic continuation," as an alternative to conventional kinship ties, as it were (102). Here again, in the idea of a body of undefiled men, united through song in celebration of a mystical wedding rite that doubles and yet denies

the institution of earthly marriage, “Lycidas” offers us a similar formulation.

Indeed, the matrimonial theme in “Lycidas” seems to offer a useful perspective on all the foregoing critical assessments. By framing its mystical marriage in terms that escape conventional Christian heteronormativity, this theme speaks to Lewis’s fear of “homosexual promiscuity” in heaven, while likewise dramatizing the extent to which angelic eroticism resists “such easy meanings as ‘Man’ [and] ‘Woman’” (Bredbeck 230). By casting heaven as the setting for a nuptial consummation deferred and frustrated on earth, it evokes Rambuss’s comments on the decorporealization of Milton’s devotional discourse. In imagining a festive occasion celebrated by a closed, same-sex company, it parallels the educational dynamic of early modern humanism. And in conceiving of this festive occasion through the customarily heterosexual institution of wedlock, it gestures toward a model of textual circulation that is simultaneously collaborative in structure and yet not predicated on the restrictive binarism of an essentialized gender opposition. In this last respect, the marriage also unites the poem with its predecessors in the classical and Christian traditions of the pastoral elegy; as Paul Alpers has observed, literary conventions mark a spot of union between disparate individuals and sensibilities, “a coming together of singers” (“Lycidas” 476; see also Alpers, *Pastoral* 80–82). In its invocation of a wedding metaphor that operates outside the mainstream of pastoral-elegiac convention, “Lycidas” enacts a selective merger with the body of its antecedents. Through the features of the elegy and the way they are used, the poem frames its own company of the elect.

[IV]

I hope it is clear that the foregoing discussion has no interest in anachronistically identifying Milton or “Lycidas” with nineteenth- and

twentieth-century notions of homosexuality. Nor do I wish to deny the significant role Milton plays in constructing the modern ideology of heteronormative companionate marriage. However, it can be—has been—argued that Milton’s writing on marriage registers a good measure of anxiety regarding the relative sexual, intellectual, and political status of husband and wife.¹⁷ I think it perfectly consistent with this view of Milton’s work that “Lycidas” should articulate a conflicted sense of matrimony: one that desires the estate and imagines it as coextensive with spiritual salvation and yet simultaneously rejects feminine sexuality as disruptive to the poet’s vocation and offers no specific place for women in its climactic vision of heavenly wedlock. It may be of further historical interest that, in promoting this sense of marriage, the poem’s discomfort with femininity foreshadows the “conjunction” of “homoeroticism and misogyny” identified by recent scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century gay men’s writing.¹⁸

But finally, having discussed at length the character of the nuptial song in “Lycidas,” I would like to end with a word about the adjective Milton uses to describe it. The song Lycidas hears is “unexpressive,” and Catherine Belsey glosses this term helpfully as “both [. . .] inexpressible and also as an instance of full presence, not an expression of something else but the thing itself, ‘unexpressive’ in that it obliterates the difference of representation” (31). This word crops up repeatedly in the Milton canon, often in connection with a divine fullness and beatitude that cannot be replicated in fallen language and that it is potentially blasphemous to attempt to reproduce. In the “Nativity” ode, for instance, a seraphic choir sings “unexpressive notes” to the newborn Christ (33–47; line 116); the Attendant Spirit of *A Mask* describes the “human countenance” as “th’express resemblance of the gods” (109–71; line 70); and the invocation to book 3 of *Paradise Lost* begins with the question “Hail holy Light, ofspring of Heav’n first-born, / [. . .] May I express thee unblam’d?” (3.1–3).

I take this last passage to be a rhetorical question, whose foregone answer is no. "God is light" (3.3), the passage continues, and to this extent the literary expression of "holy Light" becomes tantamount to making divinity subject to representation. But of course blame is always inherent in the process of reproducing full presence in the play of presence and absence that constitutes postlapsarian language, for something is inevitably lost in this translation. Indeed, that which is lost in translation composes the heart of the matter, if we accept Gerhard Tersteegen's dictum that "a god who is understood is no god" (qtd. in Otto 39); expression, by its nature, does violence to divinity. The same violence arguably inheres in the conventions of amatory expression; historically, love has taken up regular residence in the territory of the unspeakable, embodied—to the extent that it can be—in myriad little deaths and movings of the earth. Indeed, one might regard the unutterability of divine love as the originary trope for all such gestures, irrespective of the social contexts in which they evolve. What, then, of the "unexpressive" wedding song to which Lycidas attends in heaven? Can it be anything other than the voice of a love that dare not speak its name?

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to my *Doktormutter*, Maureen Quilligan, and to the memory of my first Milton teacher, Philip J. Gallagher. It could not have been written without the love and support of Jenny Caneen, for which I am most grateful.

¹ *Paradise Lost* (296–710) 11.634. All references to Milton's work are drawn from *The Riverside Milton*, unless otherwise noted. For Milton and women's issues, see, e.g., Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*; Gilbert and Gubar 187–212. On marriage and divorce, see Turner, esp. 188–309. On Milton's career as the Lady of Christ's, see Shawcross 33–60.

² On "Lycidas" and convention, see, e.g., Ransom; Fish; and Alpers, "'Lycidas'" and *Pastoral* 93–112. On the poem's politics, see Hill 49–52. On the question of vocation, see Tillyard 70–74.

³ For a further reference to this point, see Revard 182–83.

⁴ Lieb adduces four prior works as evidence of the conventional association of the pastoral elegy with wedlock: Theocritus's first idyll, Bion's "Lament for Adonis," Vergil's tenth eclogue, and Sannazaro's first piscatorial eclogue (68–69). However, Lieb admits that while Vergil's eclogue is concerned with love, it contains "no suggestion of the nuptial relationships implicit in Theocritus and Bion" (69). The connection of Theocritus's idyll 1 with matrimony "is implicitly, rather than explicitly, delineated" (Lieb 156n53); the text of the poem contains no mention of marriage, and the marital dimension of the elegy's back story (presented in Theocritus's idyll 8) is itself debatable—see the varying accounts of idyll 8 presented by Hanford (30) and Woodhouse (Woodhouse and Bush 653).

⁵ These include the "Doleful Lay of Clorinda," often attributed to Mary Herbert, countess of Pembroke; Lodowick Bryskett's "Pastorall Aeglogue upon the Death of Sir Phillip Sidney" and "The Mourning Muse of Thestylis"; Matthew Roydon's "Elegie, or Friends Passion, for His Astrophill"; Raleigh's "Epitaph upon the Right Honourable Sir Phillip Sidney"; and "Another of the Same," usually attributed to Fulke Greville. For texts, see Spenser 703–15.

⁶ Notable among the few early epicedia to handle the subject of marriage are Pontano's "Melisaeus" (Grant 306–09; Kirkconnell 161–62), Marco Girolamo Vida's *Nice* (Kirkconnell 187), Spenser's *Daphnaida* (Kirkconnell 226–28), Arthur Johnston's *De Gordoniis in arce Frenndriaca combustis* (Kirkconnell 241–42), and—perhaps most important—Johannes Secundus's *Orpheus* (Grant 177–78; Kirkconnell 91n26), whose relation to Milton's "Lycidas" has recently been explored at some length by Revard (185–87).

⁷ For earlier notice of this correspondence between "Lycidas" and the "Epitaphium Damonis," see Lieb 74.

⁸ Woodhouse and Bush 557. See also Quint's description of Sannazaro's *Arcadia* as Vergilian imitation (50); Prince's assertion that "the eclogues of the *Arcadia* display a [. . .] sustained imitation of Virgil's diction and manner" (78); and Grant's claim that the "diction, manner, and tone" of Sannazaro's eclogues "remained as in the Virgilian art-pastoral" (205).

⁹ For examples of the alternation of theme and voice in "Lycidas," see Frye, who views the poem as "arranged in the form ABACA," in which the intervening terms B and C "deal with [. . .] poetry and [. . .] the priesthood respectively" (202); Tillyard, who distinguishes between the "nominal [i.e., occasional] and real [i.e., autobiographical]" subject matter of the poem (70); and Fish, who believes (following Ransom) that "the shifts and disruptions in the poem reflect a tension between anonymity and personality" (3). Other examples of such commentary abound.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Woodhouse and Bush 729; Milton, *Riverside* 107n76; and Leonard 659n176. See also Hughes 118–19, 125n176, and Carey 253n176, who only cite Revelation 19.

¹¹ Also see Jer. 3.1, Mark 2.19, and Matt. 9.15. For early commentary on this aspect of biblical metaphor, see Augustine 321, on Ps. 74.4. For a discussion of this metaphor in the work of Donne, Herbert, and Spenser, see Summers.

¹² In the Trinity manuscript of "Lycidas," the phrase "And hears," in the left-hand margin of line 176, replaces the crossed-out word "Listening" (*Cambridge Manuscript* 34).

¹³ In keeping with this rejection, Wittreich has recently noted a possible echo of the "Lycidas" invocation at the beginning of the anonymous "To the Excellent *Orinda*" (1667). As Wittreich points out, the later poem revises "Lycidas" in service of a "radical feminism" that "contrasts" with Milton's "sexual politics" ("Under the Seal" 298–99).

¹⁴ For the Orpheus motif in Milton's work, see Tung; Falconer, esp. 63–90. For selected scholarly comment, see Bush 282–83; Kerrigan, *Complex* 170–81 and *Prophetic Milton* 133–36; Du Rocher 64–74; and Mulryan 169–70.

¹⁵ For the production of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, as categories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific and legal scrutiny, see Foucault 17–49, Bray 12–32, Smith 9–18, and Halley, among others.

¹⁶ For this line of argument see Ong 129–34, Smith 83–88, and Stewart 100–04, among others.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Shawcross 33–60, Turner (e.g., 106–23, 215–26), Quilligan 209–24, and, in terms of the broad significance of Milton's treatment of gender for women's writing and politics, Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*, esp. 1–15.

¹⁸ Koestenbaum 7. See, e.g., Koestenbaum's claim that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century gay authors viewed "authorship as a feminine process that they must steal back" (6). Dellamora has also traced the continuing importance, for Victorian gay male writers, of a "cult of friendship that is almost Greek" in its insistence on "the superiority of male friendship to love between a man and a woman, even to married love" (151).

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