

## The Homosexual Temptation of the Son in Milton's *Paradise Regained*: A Reply to John T. Shawcross and Claude J. Summers<sup>1\*</sup>

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In "Milton's *Paradise Regain'd* and the Second Temptation," John T. Shawcross engages Claude J. Summers's discussion of the "homosexual implications" of the "[t]all stripling youths rich clad, of fairer hew / Then Ganymed or Hylas" who attend the banquet with which Satan tempts Milton's Son in Book 2 of *Paradise Regained*. Shawcross states that "this sexual interruption subtly recalls the widespread rumor of Jesus's homosexuality, which persisted into the seventeenth century, as Milton must have been aware" (35; Shawcross cites *Paradise Regained* 2.352-53). Shawcross's mention of this "widespread rumor" is made in a matter-of-fact manner, but his only evidence for this affirmation appears in an endnote that follows his statement: "Summers cites references to this allegation; see 60-61 [of Summers] and notes 10 and 11" (39). However, an investigation of Summers's article reveals two important problems: firstly, Summers never claims that any such rumor was "widespread"; and secondly, Summers's own evidence for this rumor ranges from dubious to misleading.

First, Summers briefly discusses in his article "a *little-known* and *even less frequently acknowledged* heresy that posits a homosexual relationship between Jesus and John the Beloved Disciple, who describes himself throughout his gospel as the best loved of the disciples" (60; italics mine). Summers, therefore, never represents any perception of

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\*References: John T. Shawcross, "Milton's *Paradise Regain'd* and the Second Temptation," *ANQ* 21 (2008): 34-41, and Claude J. Summers, "The (Homo)sexual Temptation in Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*," *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain (New York: Haworth, 1997) 45-69.

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Jesus's alleged homosexuality as being "widespread." Second, the various pieces of evidence that Summers gives to demonstrate the existence of this "heresy" are each problematic in their own ways. Summers begins by suggesting that the "heresy may have influenced, or, perhaps more likely, been influenced by the association of St. John with an idealized Ganymede, as in the fourteenth-century *Ovidius moralizatus* by the monk Petrus Berchorius" (60). Summers cites James A. Saslow to support this assertion. But Saslow's book, although it discusses Berchorius's treatise—which portrays Ganymede as "the pure childlike soul seeking after God" (Saslow 6)—never once mentions any sort of rumor or heresy regarding a homosexual relationship between St. John and Jesus.

In his next paragraph, Summers cites John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and its discussion of St. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-67), who, Boswell writes, "gave love between those of the same gender its most profound and lasting expression" (221) and used the "heavenly marriage" (qtd. in and trans. by Boswell 226) between Jesus and St. John as the ultimate example of the spiritual unity possible between two men. But, as the passage from Aelred, which Boswell translates and Summers quotes, makes clear, Aelred celebrated Jesus and John's "virgin love" (Boswell 226)—a love removed from carnal expression and certainly quite different from the sexual temptation implicit in the "[t]all stripling youths" who appear before Milton's Jesus in *Paradise Regained*.<sup>2</sup>

Summers's next piece of evidence for the alleged heresy of Jesus's homosexuality is the portion of the infamous "Baines note," in which Christopher Marlowe allegedly asserts "[t]hat St. John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosome, that he vsed him as the sinners of Sodoma" (qtd. in Kocher 35). But one would be hard pressed to argue that the Baines note could support any belief that could even cautiously be described as an established "heresy," however rarely mentioned. We should remember that the Baines note was not actually written by Marlowe but allegedly transcribed from Marlowe's conversation by his accuser, Richard Baines,

and given to government authorities after Marlowe's arrest in 1593. Indeed, David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen call Baines's document "unreliable testimony" (viii) that "need[s] to be discounted for [its] exaggeration and for [...] having been produced under legal circumstances we would regard as a witch-hunt" (ix). Moreover, the Baines note contains so many outlandish allegations surrounding Jesus and Christianity that it can hardly be considered serious evidence for any sort of heresy; it is not a document of religious significance but rather a litany of shamelessly bawdy blasphemy.<sup>3</sup>

Summers also cites, as a piece of seventeenth-century evidence for the heresy, James I's defense, which Summers claims was known to Milton, of "his homoerotic attachment to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, by reference to the relationship of Jesus to John. As James told his council, 'Christ had his John, and I have my George'" (61).<sup>4</sup> But the context of James's words does not involve sexual matters between himself and Buckingham. Rather, James made this statement in the context of defending his favoritism toward Buckingham in court matters.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, whatever the specific nature of James and Buckingham's relationship,<sup>6</sup> it is difficult to imagine that the politically astute James—who wrote in *Basilikon Doron*, his instruction manual on kingship to Prince Henry, that sodomy is one of "the horrible crimes that yee are bound in conscience never to forgive" (qtd. in Young 49)—would simultaneously proclaim to his council both his own sexual relationship with Buckingham and Jesus's sexual relationship with John. Indeed, Maurice Lee goes so far as to argue: "It is really impossible to suppose that if James had engaged in physical sexual relations with his George, he would have drawn this parallel" (248).

While these four pieces of evidence are unconvincing but acceptable, Summers's final argument is genuinely problematic. In an endnote, Summers makes the following striking assertion:

In *Michael and the Dragon, or Christ Tempted and Satan Foyled* (1635), Daniel Dyke implied a homosexual temptation of Jesus when he advised his readers to develop "this same Stoicall eye of our Saviour, that we may see eye-

pleasing and tempting objects, and not be set a-gogge, [...] as he with the beauty of a young boy, to whom it was answered, that the Praetor must have continent eyes, as well as hands." (66)<sup>7</sup>

The above passage presents Dyke's quotation in a way that gives readers the impression that both the "he" after the ellipses and "the Praetor" are references to Jesus. But examining Dyke's quotation in its context and with ellipses removed reveals something entirely different:

[B]ut get that same *oculum irretorum*, and this same Stoicall eye of our Saviour, that we may see eye-pleasing and tempting objects, and not bee set a-gogge, as the Disciples, Luke 21. [sic] with the beauty of the Temple; and as he with the beauty of a young boy, to whom it was answered, that the Praetor must have continent eyes, as wel as hands. (318; italics original)

In the left column of Dyke's page, next to the section following the semi-colon, is the following reference regarding the aforementioned Praetor: "Cicer. *offic.* I" (318). Clearly Dyke is using two separate negative examples here, separated by a semi-colon. The first example concerns Jesus's disciples in Luke 21; the second occurs in Book I of Cicero's *De Officiis* (ca. 44 BC), in which the Praetor in question is not Jesus but Sophocles.

What Summers has done is to selectively quote from Dyke's reference to Cicero, in order to give the impression that it was Jesus, not Sophocles, who was being admonished for his implicitly sexual attraction to a "beautiful boy."<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, it seems highly unlikely that there was any "widespread rumor" or circulating "heresy" during or before the seventeenth century regarding Jesus's homosexuality. Certainly, neither Summers nor Shawcross, who quotes from Summers, demonstrates the presence of such a rumor or heresy either in early modern or in high medieval times. Given the paucity of the evidence, it seems best to read the "[t]all stripling youths" in *Paradise Regained* as, in the words of Barbara Lewalski, part of "the panorama of refined sexual pleasure offered to Christ" (224), something included amidst

the sweep of fleshly temptation that Milton's Son experiences to demonstrate that he "was *fully* tempted in every way that a human being can be tempted" (Rollinson 32).

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Boswell's book has been criticized as inaccurate by scholars of various perspectives. These include gay scholars who accuse Boswell of "seeking to minimize the unbroken ascetic and antihomosexual crescendo of the Biblical, patristic, and later Scholastic teaching on homosexuality" (Johansson, Dynes, Lauritsen, par. 9). Also noteworthy is Oxford University lecturer James M. Houston, who calls Boswell's depiction of Aeldred "surely historical anachronism in the worst sense" (3).

<sup>3</sup>The Baines note's claims include "that all the new testament is filthily written"; "[t]hat the woman of Samaria & her sister were whores & that Christ knew them dishonestly"; and "[t]hat the Angell Gabriell was Baud to the holy ghost, because he brought the salutation to Mary" (qtd. in Kocher 35, 36).

<sup>4</sup>Summers cites Willson (384) for James's quotation.

<sup>5</sup>See Lee 248.

<sup>6</sup>Scholars have differed on this matter. Lockyer cautiously suggests there were physical sexual relations between James and Buckingham (22), but Lee firmly argues against this (248-49). More recently, both Croft (98) and Young (48-50) affirm a physical sexual relationship between James and Buckingham, although Young equivocates regarding whether or not sodomy actually occurred. Smith's statement that the degree to which their relationship "was actively physical will probably never be known" (56) seems appropriate.

<sup>7</sup>Summers credits Joseph Wittreich "for calling my attention to this reference" (66).

<sup>8</sup>Here is the relevant quotation from *De Officiis* in its larger context, employing a translation that appeared in 1902: "When Pericles had for his colleague in the praetorship Sophocles the poet, and as they were discoursing upon their joint official duty, a beautiful boy by chance passed by, Sophocles exclaimed, 'What a charming boy, Pericles!' but Pericles very properly told him, 'A magistrate ought to keep not only his hands, but his eyes under restraint'" (106).

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