

C. S. Lewis's Complex Relationship with Queer Milton Studies: Indirect Inspiration, Hegemonic Antagonist, and Erased Inconvenient Forerunner¹

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Abstract

This essay discusses queer Milton scholarship’s various responses to C. S. Lewis’s *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, beginning with Gregory Bredbeck’s groundbreaking 1991 *PMLA* article through the 2018 volume *Queer Milton* and beyond. Although most of these responses portray Lewis as one whose explicit denial of queer angelic behavior in *Paradise Lost* has served to prevent queer readings of Milton, Lewis can also be seen as one who, by this explicit denial, indirectly brought about queer Milton studies. Attention will be paid to Drew Daniel’s unexpected 2014 portrayal of Lewis’s offering an especially daring queer vision of *Paradise Lost*, a portrayal that is erased when Daniel’s 2014 essay is revised for the 2018 *Queer Milton*.

As I have discussed in previous essays, the reception history of C. S. Lewis’s *A Preface to Paradise Lost* has been largely antagonistic, with various critics both taking exception to Lewis’s scathing analysis of Milton’s Satan² and portraying Lewis as one whose hegemonic influence has prevented honest discussion of difficult passages in *Paradise Lost* that challenge Lewis’s portrayal of an orthodox Milton whose great epic represents the apex of literature in the received Christian tradition.³ Within this latter category stands queer Milton studies, a critical approach to Milton now three decades old that has become increasingly

visible within Milton scholarship, reaching heightened prominence when the 2014 *Early Modern Culture* special issue "Queer Milton" was granted the Milton Society of America's Irene Samuel Award as the most distinguished collection of essays on Milton published that year. The stature of queer Milton studies increased further when the comparatively slim "Queer Milton" was expanded into the much larger 2018 book *Queer Milton*, a collection that, according to Will Stockton in his "Afterword," portrays not merely a single queer Milton, but various "queer Miltons, in the plural" (295), with each essay offering its own queer Milton in keeping with the respective queer interpretation of each individual contributor, who in turn might be building off the queer Milton of a critical predecessor.⁴

As we shall see in this essay, the earliest voices in queer Milton studies substantively craft their daring readings of Milton's writings in direct opposition to Lewis's orthodox and self-consciously heteronormative approach to *Paradise Lost*. This practice has very recently prompted at least one major queer Milton scholar to suggest that Lewis's *Preface* and the critical response against him did in fact essentially bring about the enterprise of queer readings of Milton. Melissa Sanchez writes: "At least since C. S. Lewis declared himself embarrassed by the possibility that Milton's angels might lead 'a life of homosexual promiscuity,' readers have suspected that Milton imagines pleasures beyond those of procreative marriage" (309-10). Unsurprisingly, various queer Milton scholars who have invoked Lewis have portrayed him as the most prominent critical voice of a heteronormativity that would obfuscate queer readings to be seen in Milton's texts, a portrayal of Lewis that I will chronicle below. But queer Milton studies' relationship to Lewis is ultimately more complex than that of a revolutionary critical school to a powerful, even hegemonic conservative Christian antagonist. Indeed, as Sanchez's above statement perhaps intimates, Lewis's own reading of *Paradise Lost* arguably invites a queer reading of Milton before dismissing it. Furthermore, one particularly engaging essay within the special issue "Queer Milton" actually portrays Lewis as an inspiring

and ironically daring forerunner to the enterprise of queer Milton studies, a portrayal made all the more curious in that a subsequent rewriting of this same essay that appears within the 2018 edited volume *Queer Milton* excises all reference to Lewis's previously named queer reading of Milton's epic. This erasure of Lewis as queer Milton studies' critical forerunner serves to relegate Lewis to the simple and more palatable role of a mere antagonist against the enterprise of queer Milton studies, a relegation that obfuscates both Lewis's complexities as a critic and his own multifaceted attitudes toward homosexuality.

Queer Milton studies' longstanding response to Lewis stems from his famous/infamous discussion in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* of Raphael's description of angelic sexuality in book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Raphael, responding to Adam's inquiry regarding whether or not angels physically make love, blushing tells Adam that when angels "embrace" (626), they actually "mix" in a way that is "[t]otal" (627), "enjoy[ing]" a "Union of Pure with Pure" that is hindered by no "obstacle" of flesh and bones (623, 627, 624). Lewis's discussion is actually quite lengthy and almost never engaged within its larger context, but the most commonly referenced portion reads as follows:

A certain amount of critical prudery, in which I once shared, has been aroused by the account of what [Henry] More has called "the amorous propension" of Milton's angels (*P. L.* VIII, 618-29). The trouble is, I think, that since these exalted creatures are all spoken of by masculine pronouns, we tend, half consciously, to think that Milton is attributing to them a life of homosexual promiscuity. That he was poetically imprudent in raising a matter which invites such misconception I do not deny; but the real meaning is certainly not filthy, and certainly not foolish. (109)

We may note that although Lewis's discussion promptly dismisses the notion of homosexual angelic activity, Lewis first gives explicit voice to what he says readers "half consciously" think regarding what is now called the "queer" nature of Milton's angels. As Sanchez's aforementioned statement suggests, it was Lewis's explicit utterance of a then rather taboo subject that eventually elicited the responses of various queer Milton critics, thus indirectly giving birth to the entire enterprise

of queer Milton studies. Curiously, an analogy may be seen between this critical phenomenon and William Empson's much earlier remark in *Milton's God* that Lewis had "let in some needed fresh air [...] by saying, 'Many of those who say they dislike Milton's God only mean that they dislike God'" (9; quoting *Preface* 126). For Empson, whose analysis of *Paradise Lost* is largely framed in opposition to Lewis's, Lewis's statement enabled him to state his position forthrightly without apology; he writes: "I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school" (9-10), and uses his agreement with Lewis's somewhat daring remark as a platform to offer his critique of Milton's God. As we shall see below, queer Miltonists have by and large not echoed Empson's appreciation for Lewis,⁵ but we may surmise that on some level Lewis's above remarks regarding what appears to be angelic homosexuality "let in some needed fresh air" for queer Miltonists, whose pioneering critics often framed their readings of Milton in opposition to Lewis's denial of what they saw as the evident queerness in *Paradise Lost*.

The first queer Milton scholar to address Lewis's above quotation is Gregory W. Bredbeck in his groundbreaking 1991 *PMLA* article, "Milton's Ganymede: Negotiations of Homoerotic Tradition in *Paradise Regained*." It is noteworthy indeed that this first explicitly queer reading of Milton actually begins with Bredbeck's quoting the above passage by Lewis in its totality. Bredbeck casts his study in relation to "recent feminist inquiries" that challenge "masculine assumptions" in literary criticism and explore "alternative forms of Renaissance gender construction," and he aims to "forcefully extend" Renaissance gender studies through "reading Milton's uses of homoeroticism" (262). Bredbeck highlights "Lewis's condemnation of Milton's 'poetical imprudence'" as a pronouncement that "succinctly displays two divergent ideas that still hinder Milton studies and have yet to be explored fully: the ease with which homoeroticism can be detected in Milton's canon and the urgency with which it is written away" (262). Although, as we shall see below, leaders in queer Milton studies have in recent years presented their movement as connected to the larger critical movement of the

New Milton Criticism,⁶ we may see here that Bredbeck anticipates by more than a decade that movement's portrayal of Lewis as a scholar whose pontifications have prevented further questions. Moreover, Bredbeck portrays Lewis as a powerful representative of a long tradition of criticism that has exercised hegemonic authority against new avenues of inquiry. Curiously, Bredbeck's article does not analyze *Paradise Lost*, but *Paradise Regained*. For Bredbeck, the impact of Lewis's sweeping pronouncements affects readers' perceptions of the entire Miltonic canon and indeed the whole of seventeenth-century literature. Bredbeck goes on to write that Lewis's comments

seem not so much "criticism" as a "common gloss," a logical continuation of the processes of stigmatization, segregation, and isolation that exemplify seventeenth-century interpretations. Lewis—like many other critics before and since—does not explain Milton's construction of gender but rather empowers the tradition that gives it meaning through contradistinction. (273)

To continue to accept Lewis's reading, then, is to ignore the homoeroticism that actually exists in Milton's writings. Bredbeck laments "what has been lost of Milton's canon in the lengthy historical process of explaining it" (273). What is needed, he asserts, is a new tradition that unashamedly embraces the complexities of Milton's portrayals of sexuality.

Bredbeck also complains that

[t]he excision of homoeroticism from Milton's canon ahistoricizes the texts, removing them from the dynamics of sex and sexuality that typify seventeenth-century England. It becomes less difficult to believe that Milton actively engaged such topics when one realizes that the articulation of sexual deviance was, if not the norm, then certainly not abnormal during the later Renaissance. (262-63)

Bredbeck's criticism that Lewis's representative "excision of homoeroticism" inaccurately depicts Milton's social milieu anticipates John Rumrich's 1996 contention that Lewis's sweeping conception of "the ordinary educated and Christian audience in Milton's time" (*Preface* 91) obfuscates the degree of socio-religious diversity within the broader

Christian population of mid-seventeenth-century England (Rumrich, *Milton Unbound* 34-35). And although Bredbeck does not mention Lewis's Christianity, his engagement with Lewis connects to some of the other charges made against Lewis decades earlier: Lewis's sometimes-decried role as a "public moralist" (Adams 38; Bergonzi 171) and his tendency to gloss over or explain away difficult passages that might interfere with Lewis's artificial presentation of *Paradise Lost* as a monument to orthodox "mere" Christianity. From Bredbeck's perspective, Lewis oversimplifies both Milton's writings and Milton's England, and Bredbeck calls for fresh reengagements with each.

Bredbeck's engagement with Lewis was eventually followed by Bruce Boehrer's 2002 *PMLA* article, "'Lycidas': The Pastoral Elegy as Same-Sex Epithalamium." Like Bredbeck, Boehrer focuses on a text other than *Paradise Lost*, similarly noting Lewis's discussion of angelic sexuality. Stating that "Lewis frets over a perceived excessive of sexual potential in the Milton canon," Boehrer portrays Lewis as a "strong reader" representative of those who

have been notoriously disturbed by the apparent "homosexual promiscuity" of Milton's heaven ([109]): a place [...] 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). (232)

For Boehrer, the implicit homosexual overtones of heaven are plentiful, including even parallels between God and Adam, and Apollo and his beloved Spartan Prince Hyacinth. But Lewis would seek to elide such matters. In contrast to "Lewis's fear" of Milton's heavenly homoeroticism, Boehrer argues that "Lycidas" "fram[es] its mystical marriage in terms that escape conventional Christian heteronormativity" (233). Indeed, Lewis's brand of Christianity has presented an overly simplistic understanding of Milton's complex depictions of sexuality.

Another queer reading of Milton is offered by Jonathan Goldberg in his chapter "Milton's Angels" within his book *The Seeds of Things* (2009). Goldberg chides Lewis because he at first recognizes, "not incorrectly,"

that Milton's angels appear to enjoy "'a life of homosexual promiscuity'" [109] but then "proceeds to deny" what Raphael's words to Adam rather obviously suggest (198). Lewis makes this critical decision because he is, "of course, certain that homosexuality is," to use Lewis's word, "'filthy'" (198). Indeed, "Lewis chose to believe that whatever form of sex life the angels have, it is not human sex." Consequently, Lewis, influenced by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, solved the "problem" regarding "angelic sex" by ascribing to Milton's angels a kind of "sexlessness" (198). For Goldberg, Lewis's moral squeamishness causes him to quash a straightforward, albeit uncomfortable, understanding of Raphael's words.

Similarly, five years later, Will Stockton in his Introduction to the special issue "Queer Milton" argues that Lewis's presentation avoids "the erotic possibilities" of Raphael's account, stating that Lewis's reading "forecloses the queer (filthy, foolish)" interpretation of that account ("An Introduction" 8). In doing so, Stockton, who specifically connects the "Queer Milton" project to the New Milton Criticism⁷—a critical movement within Milton studies that "embraces indeterminacy and incertitude" as of central import to Milton's writings (Herman 1)—re-states the charge of various New Milton Critics that Lewis's *Preface* aims to forestall critical discussion of unorthodox or uncomfortable topics in *Paradise Lost*.

But although Stockton's statement continues the received queer Milton studies portrayal of Lewis as one whose sexual squeamishness stifles queer readings of Milton, Drew Daniel, in his contribution to "Queer Milton" entitled "Dagon as Queer Assemblage: Effeminacy and Terror in *Samson Agonistes*," explicitly and unexpectedly champions the pursuit and development of Lewis's queer Milton. In his essay, after restating the basic objections to Lewis offered by his queer Milton studies predecessors, Daniel writes: "Yet, in a chapter forbiddingly titled 'The Mistake About Milton's Angels,' Lewis evades the specter of male homosexual angels by recourse to an *even queerer formulation* of a *celestial hermaphroditic free-for-all*" (70; italics added). Daniel then quotes Lewis:

[...] there exists among these creatures, according to Milton, something that might be called transsexuality. The impulse of mutual love is expressed by the total interpenetration of two aerial bodies; “total they mix” because they are ductile and homogeneous—they mix like wine and water, or rather like two wines. (Daniel 70, quoting Lewis 109-10; brackets in Daniel)

Significantly, none of the aforementioned queer Milton scholars before Daniel quotes Lewis’s above discussion of “transsexuality,” but Daniel is clearly excited by its interpretive potential. He then goes on, surprisingly enough, to actually critique what he considers the too modest assertions of the groundbreaking queer Milton scholar Bredbeck in favor of the daring queer possibilities postulated by, of all people, Lewis. Lamenting that Bredbeck, “frustratingly,” “generally sticks to the script of simply discovering or uncovering traces of male homosexuality in the Miltonic text,” Daniel credits Bredbeck only for offering a cautionary (albeit valuable) “first step” in queer readings of Milton (70). Daniel then calls for a larger “response which reconsiders the volatility of the a-gendered zones that both Milton’s work *and Lewis’ text* potentially make available to the queer critic” (70; italics added). Remarkably, Daniel here presents Lewis, in spite of himself, as one who opens up the horizons of queer Milton studies in ways that transcend Bredbeck’s modest aims. Indeed, it is the imaginative queer vision of Lewis’s radical presentation, not Bredbeck’s subdued one, that Daniel calls queer critics to pursue.

And Daniel does himself pursue Lewis’s queer Milton in the remainder of his essay, writing of “Dagon’s underlayer of hermaphroditic meanings” which “partakes of the material ambiguity” characteristic of “all spirits, both angelic and demonic” (77)—a presentation that recalls Daniel’s celebration of Lewis’s “hermaphroditic” angels. Moreover, Dagon’s hermaphroditic qualities are reflected in both Samson and Dalila, each of whom exhibit an ambiguous mixture of male and female (78-79). In a very real sense, Daniel’s 2014 queer Milton is his development of Lewis’s queer Milton.

But in 2018, the visions of the different queer Miltons appear to reach an impasse. Indeed, the version of “Dagon as Queer Assemblage” that

appears in *Queer Milton* erases Daniel's "Queer Milton" discussion of Lewis's queer Milton. Strikingly, although the rest of Daniel's essay is revised only slightly, the section containing his discussion of Lewis and Bredbeck is removed entirely. Of course, Lewis's queer Milton silently remains in Daniel's 2018 presentation of the hermaphroditic Dagon and his queer assemblage. But Daniel no longer acknowledges his own queer Milton's inconvenient parentage. There could be various motivations for Lewis's erasure, but its effect is both to obfuscate Daniel's appropriation of Lewis's queer Milton into Daniel's own queer Milton and to eliminate Daniel's attendant frustration with Bredbeck's more modestly presented queer Milton.

This latter erasure coincides with Erin Murphy's lead essay in *Queer Milton*, which was not part of the 2014 special issue "Queer Milton." Murphy's essay begins with a developed discussion of not only Bredbeck's pathbreaking work in queer Milton scholarship but also Murphy's heartfelt account of having discovered Bredbeck's scholarship and seeking to contact him, only to learn of his youthful death. Comparing her feelings to what Milton expresses in *Lycidas*, Murphy writes, "I found myself in the very peculiar state of mourning a young man I had never met five years after he died" (2). Regarding Bredbeck's seminal article, she writes: "By revisiting and refusing C. S. Lewis's homophobic reading of the angels in *Paradise Lost* as anachronistic [...] Bredbeck moves beyond identifying moments of male homoeroticism to embark on a queerer analysis that undermines any simple sense of [*Paradise Regained's*] heteronormativity" (2). Here, Murphy credits Bredbeck's article with a further reaching queer vision than Daniel did in 2014. Murphy's affectionate and laudatory portrayal of Bredbeck and his daring, pioneering work in queer Milton studies—over and against Lewis's "homophobic reading"—does not fit neatly with Daniel's 2014 calling on queer critics to move past Bredbeck's comparatively timid "first step" and instead develop Lewis's more audacious queer Milton. And perhaps *Queer Milton* has no place for Daniel's possibly discomfiting revelation that his own queer Milton appropriated and developed Lewis's queer Milton.

Notably, *Queer Milton's* only other mention of Lewis is by Lara Dodds, who decries Lewis's "homophobic commentary on" Raphael's description (158), asserting that, despite Lewis's aforementioned warning "against the assumption that Milton imagined the angels living 'a life of homosexual promiscuity,' most readers now presume that the erotic lives of the angels are queer" (153-54). Dodds offers no statistical evidence to support her claim regarding "most readers," but she here presents Lewis not only as bigoted but also as one whose commentary on Milton's angels has been superseded by a queer hermeneutic—a stark contrast to Daniel's 2014 reading of Lewis's larger text's being, paradoxically, a visionary springboard from which daring queer readings can be launched.

Tellingly, both Murphy and Dodds describe Lewis's critical stance as "homophobic." But Lewis's life and writings destabilize portraying Lewis as practicing or fomenting homophobia, a phenomenon Oxford Reference defines as "[n]egative attitudes towards homosexual people and homosexuality which may be manifested in discrimination, hostile behaviour, or hate crimes." Indeed, Lewis is not easily accused of such behavior or attitudes. Significantly, the man who, besides Lewis's brother, is generally considered Lewis's best friend, Arthur Greeves, was homosexually inclined, something Greeves revealed to Lewis in 1918 (McGrath 72).⁸ The depth and importance of Lewis and Greeves's friendship, which spanned from their adolescence through Lewis's death, was profound. Lewis credited Greeves with being instrumental in his own 1931 Christian conversion, for demonstrating to Lewis how to feel deeply, and for teaching him "charity" while resisting Lewis's "arrogance" (Brown 89-90).⁹ Lewis dedicated his first Christian book, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), to Greeves; his discussion of friendship in *The Four Loves* (1960) is highly influenced by his friendship with Greeves; and his 296 letters to Greeves from 1914 to 1963 make up the volume *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (1979) (Brown 88-89). Moreover, though maintaining that homosexual physical acts were sinful, Lewis in 1958 and 1959 wrote against the criminalization of homosexual acts (*Letters* 473; *Collected Letters* 3:

1154)—which were illegal in the UK until four years after his death—and in 1959 expressed compassion for “persecuted” homosexuals for whom such criminalization created “a blackmailers’ paradise” (*Collected Letters* 3: 1154). This information arguably complicates describing his commentary on *Paradise Lost* as “homophobic,” for Lewis’s complex attitude regarding homosexuality suggests that his words resist easy pigeonholing, something that Daniel’s paradoxical 2014 use of Lewis evidences.

But Lewis’s complexities aside, and although Lewis’s now-unacknowledged influence still manifests itself in Daniel’s 2018 version, the fact remains that *Queer Milton* omits explicit reference to Lewis’s queer Milton—and the tensions attendant to invoking Lewis in this manner—in favor of a different, dare we say a more palatable and seamless, queer narrative. We may ask if Lewis’s erasure is in keeping with the collection’s stated celebration of multiple queer Miltons, or, for that matter, with the larger New Milton Criticism’s emphases on tensions and contradictions. And given that *Queer Milton* stands in the line of a larger critical tradition encompassing Lewis’s various scholarly opponents, including A. J. A. Walcott, Elmer Edgar Stoll, G. Rostrevor Hamilton, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, John Peter, William Empson, John Rumrich, the New Milton Criticism, and queer Milton criticism, another question bears asking: Has Lewis’s *Preface* served to stifle critical discussion or to elicit more of it? And if the longstanding critical response to *A Preface* suggests the latter,¹⁰ whence comes the impulse to erase Lewis?

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NOTES

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and anonymous readers at Connotations for their insights and suggestions for improving this essay.

²See, most prominently, discussions of Waldock, Stoll, Hamilton, and Werblowsky in Urban, "C. S. Lewis and Satan"; and the discussion of Empson in Urban, "C. S. Lewis and His Later Respondents."

³See the above endnote and also discussions of Curran, Rumrich, the New Milton Criticism, and, indirectly, Fish in "C. S. Lewis and His Later Respondents"; as well as the discussion of the New Milton Criticism in Urban, "Speaking for the Dead," 97-100.

⁴To avoid confusion regarding similar terminology, let me be clear that, throughout this essay, "Queer Milton" refers to the 2014 special issue of *Early Modern Culture*; *Queer Milton* refers to the 2018 book / collection of essays; and "queer Milton" (with no quotation marks in this essay's text proper) refers to any given critic's queer interpretation of Milton. For example, later in this essay I refer to "Lewis's queer Milton" and "Daniel's own queer Milton."

⁵See Empson 7 and 9.

⁶See Stockton, "An Introduction" 11-12n12; Orvis, "Preface" v; and Stockton, "Afterword" 294.

⁷See Stockton, "An Introduction" 11-12n12.

⁸For discussion of Greeves's sexual orientation, see especially Christopher.

⁹Brown quotes the unpublished *Lewis Papers*. Greeves's role in Lewis's spiritual development has very recently been noted by the prominent Milton scholar John Rumrich in "William Empson and C. S. Lewis" 73-74.

¹⁰In addition to Urban's aforementioned articles, see also McBride and the more general coverage of the critical response to *A Preface* offered by Keena.

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