“Til We Mix Wounds”: Divine Bodies and the Homoerotics of Christian Devotion in English Renaissance Religious Poetry

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Research Question:

How can the prevalence of homoerotic desire for the divine in Renaissance religious poetry be reconciled with a culture which handles male-male sexuality prohibitively?

Introduction:

The English Renaissance produced a vigorous outpouring of Christian religious poetry, as both Protestants and Catholics in a nation beset by spiritual turmoil sought to re-evaluate humanity’s relationship with God. Since the advent of queer theory as a major force within Renaissance literary criticism in the 1990s, critics have increasingly noted that the devotional poetry of the period, particularly that of the Metaphysical poets, frequently subjects the body of Christ to a distinctly homoerotic desire, and often discusses communion with Christ in highly sexualized terms. In the last decade, non-heteronormative criticism of the English Renaissance has also expanded to include the works of John Milton, with a similar eros being noted in Milton’s descriptions of angels, their relationships, and Adam’s interactions with the archangel Raphael in *Paradise Lost*. This creates an apparent contradiction in Renaissance religious thought, in which “a cultural formation whose investment in men’s desire for the male body is pronouncedly phobic and prohibitive” (Richard Rambuss, “Pleasure and Devotion” 243) wars with an open display of erotic desire for masculine, divine bodies. This paper examines a number of works by John Donne, Thomas Traherne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and John Milton in an effort to reconcile this apparent contradiction by decentering a binary of hetero- and homosexual desire in which the former is privileged in favor of a construction of acceptable sexuality that is focused on spiritual motility.

Critical Framework:

Since the late nineteenth century, the primary framework in which human sexuality has been discussed is as a binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality which revolves solely around gender object choice (i.e., same-sex or other-sex attraction), and in which the former is considered normal and privileged, the latter abnormal and prohibited (Sedgwick 32-34). This paper works predominantly from a queer theoretical framework which attempts to highlight that binary as anachronistic and unstable when applied to Renaissance conceptions of sexuality. Drawing particularly from the concept put forth by Eve Sedgwick that even amongst people of the same “orientation,” a number of other concerns, including cultural and religious sentiment, may be as important as, if not more important than, object choice to the construction of their sexual identity (36). Working from this framework, this paper aims to show that salvific
potential, not object choice, was far more significant to the privileging of sexuality in English Renaissance poetry.

**Discussion:**

The selected works display a strong tendency towards sexualized and homoerotic language in their desire for the divine. Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, for example, figure the act of salvation as a struggle between God and Satan for possession of the speaker, one in which God is called upon to “rise” – that is, to become erect – “and for thine owne work fight” (“Sonnet 2” line 11), and to “ravish” the speaker, thus allowing the speaker to “rise and stand” (“Sonnet 14 line 3) himself. Hebert and Crashaw both explore the idea of Christ’s wounds as orifices on which Christian desire is fixated, with Crashaw notably figuring them as “mouths and lips, / to pay the sweet sum of thy kissing (“On The Wounds of Our Crucified Lord” lines 13-14), envisioning the act of worship as a sort of oral intercourse. “Extreme images of liquefaction” (Rambuss, “Pleasure and Devotion” 259) feature regularly in Crashaw’s works as well, and in those of Traherne, who imagine Christ’s love as a figurative ejaculation, “O Nectar! O Delicious Stream! / O ravishing and only pleasure” (“Love” lines 1-2), and ties himself openly to a homoerotic tradition by figuring himself as Christ’s “Ganimede” (“Love” 35). Milton moves away from the direct examination of Christ as an object of sexual desire, though he does notably depict Satan tempting the savior with beautiful men (*Paradise Regained* 2.352-353), shifting his attentions to angels, instead. Milton’s Adam shows a clear attraction towards the Archangel Raphael, telling him “while sit with thee, I seem in heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 8.210) before enquiring of him whether angels – a race depicted as wholly masculine – engage in sex, and receiving, with the pleased flush that is “love’s proper hue” (8.619), an affirmative answer.

If these open displays of homoerotic sentiment in poetry addressing the most sacred of topics did not do enough to trouble the apparently heteronormative construction of licit sexuality of the Renaissance, these author’s works often display an ambivalence towards – or even distaste for – man’s attraction to woman. Milton is perhaps the best example of this, troubling the relationship between man and woman to such an extent as to prompt Milton scholar Will Stockton to view *Paradise Lost* as the consummate example of heterosexuality as an “anachronistic characterization of male-female relations” (207) in the Renaissance. Marriage – a spiritually productive union of souls – is privileged, but heterosexual attraction does not necessarily receive the same treatment. Milton’s Adam is admonished repeatedly for his excessive interest in Eve’s physicality and sexuality, being warned not to become overly enamored of “the sense of touch whereby mankind / is propagated” (*Paradise Lost* 8.579-580) or to be “fondly overcome with female charm” (9.999). The other authors considered in this paper similarly problematize the attraction of man and woman. Traherne figures “A Woman’s Hand” as being, like “a House…a piece of Gold, / a Feast, [and] a costly Suit” (“An Infant-Ey” lines 43-44), part of a world of sinful things which distract the eye from God. Crashaw speaks of marriage and women in the most lackluster of terms, entirely focused on the virtue of marriage. Donne, who had been a great philanderer in his youth, before coming to the Anglican priesthood,
warns against “idolatrie” and “prophane love” (“Sonnet 13” line 9; “Sonnet 19” line 6). Herbert, who notably struggles with discussions of human sexuality “without recourse to imagery of pollution, filth, and decay” (Schoenfeldt 251) – imagery absent from his sexualized devotional works – warns all good Christian men away from any congress with women outside of marriage.

A solution to this privileged homoeroticism and problematized heteroeroticism against the backdrop of an ostensibly heteronormative Renaissance culture begins to arise in the examination of the desires present in these works through a lens of spiritual movement and transformation. In Paradise Lost, Milton writes that the “true love” which god has ordained for humanity “is the scale / by which to heavenly love thou may’st ascend” (8.591-592), a heavenly love which consists of a pure mixing unencumbered by “membrane, joint, or limb” (8.625) in miniature of the final day when all the holy will be in union with God. This figuration of “true love” as something which effects in humanity a spiritual ascension or unity with the Godhead is repeated in each of the works this paper examines. Traherne sees his submission to Christ as “boy” and “bride” (“Love” 37, 44) as allowing the savior to “take [him] up” (“The Apostasy” line 36) to Heaven, while Herbert figures the “bag” – the orifical opening in Christ’s wounded side – as a vessel in which prayers and souls might be carried “unto [the] Father’s hands and sight” (“The Bag” line 33). Crashaw hopes that in his oral intercourse with the divine wounds, he and Christ might “become one crucifix” (“Sancta Maria Dolorum” line 100), while Donne sees his penetration by the ravishing Godhead as a path to “joynture in the knottie Trinitie” (“Sonnet 16 line 3), a union as much spiritual as physical. The desire to mix physically with divine bodies is part of a wider desire to mix perfectly with divinity, and thus carries salvific potential.

Conclusion:

These works reveal a paradigmatic queerness in the construction of sexuality in the religious consciousness of the English Renaissance. Homoeroticism, and even at times a degree of heterophobia, abound in Renaissance texts in a way that cannot be explained by a simple binary opposition in which heterosexuality is normative and privileged and homosexuality deviant and prohibited solely on the basis of object choice. Instead, these works show a construction of sexuality which revolves around a desire for spiritual uplift and transfiguration in which all things which tie human desire to the physical, transitory world are viewed in a negative light, while those things which draw the mortal gaze upward are praised. While this produces a seemingly heteronormative and restrictive view of mortal sexual relations in the Renaissance, creating taboos around both sodomy and extramarital sex as unproductive acts outside of the divinely appointed sacraments of marriage and procreation, it also leaves surprising room for intense expressions of sexualized and homoerotic desire for the divine, as that desire for physical union is used to reflect a desire for spiritual, heavenly union.
References


