

Apology for Smectymnuus: The Chastity of Marital Sex

Megan Domson
December 2nd, 2024
ENL 4303
Prof. Rudnytsky

John Milton wrote about the importance of chastity throughout his poetry and prose. His written works denote that he himself took a vow of chastity; however, Milton marries three times in his lifetime. He defends his chastity in *Apology for Smectymnuus*, writing, “I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love (I mean that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only virtue, which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy” (p. 694). Milton’s reverence for chastity and the cup’s allusion to sanctified sex explains how virtue allows the worthy to partake in marital sex as well as remain chaste.

In *Apology for Smectymnuus*, Milton depicts how chastity was introduced to him at a young age. He describes the stories he read about devout knights, explaining if “[a knight] should defend to the expense of his best blood ... the honor and chastity of virgin or matron; ... what a noble virtue chastity sure must be” (p. 694). This was the beginning of Milton’s dedication to chastity. His early poetry confirms that being chaste would allow him to be a poet for God. In “Elegy VI,” a poem he wrote for his friend Charles Diodati, Milton claims that he is chosen by God to write poetry, writing, “I am singing the heaven-descended King, the bringer of peace, and the blessed times” (p. 52). He describes how “he who sings now of the sacred counsels of the gods on high ... let him live sparingly” (p. 52), explaining that he must practice temperance in all aspects of his life to write divine poetry. Milton also believes that being chaste will ensure his admission to an exclusive place in heaven reserved for virgins. In The Book of Revelations, it’s explained that “no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty four thousand ... These are they that were not defiled with women; for they are virgins” (14: 1-4). In the eulogy, “Damon’s Epitaph,” Milton praises Damon’s chastity, writing, “the rewards of virginity are reserved for you... you shall enact your part eternally in the immortal marriage where song and the sound of the lyre are mingled in ecstasy” (p. 139). Milton celebrates

Damon's destination in the choir of virgins and simultaneously expresses his respect for those who achieve that fate. He implies his own desire to earn a place in heaven's exclusive choir, further validating his dedication to chastity.

Consumption is an allusion for sex in Milton's written works but was first employed in biblical texts. For example, in *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton references Proverbs to define fornication, writing, "such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness" (ii. 26, 27). Milton learned this allusion from his studies, going on to use consumption to describe sex in his own works. For instance, Milton defines sexual desire as "the fleshy appetite" (p. 708), in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. More specifically, Milton uses a cup as an allusion for sex in *A Mask*, a play underscoring the importance of chastity. *A Mask* employs the character Comus as the personification of sexual temptation who uses backwards logic and selfish reasoning to try to persuade the Lady to betray her virtue and sleep with him. When Comus enters, he is depicted as holding a glass in his hand, which he later tries to force the Lady to drink from. Comus says to the Lady,

But this will cure all straight, one sip of this

Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight

Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste. (ll. 811-13).

The cup represents what Comus wants the Lady to partake in, which is forfeiting her virginity to him and betraying her vow of chastity. Milton describes a similar cup in his later work, *Apology for Smectymnuus*, using its association to define its contents as marital sex.

After describing virtue's cup, in *Apology for Smectymnuus*, Milton introduces a second drink, writing, "the rest are cheated with a thick intoxicating potion which a certain sorceress, the abuser of love's name, carries about" (p. 694). He's referring to Circe, the sorceress depicted in

The Odyssey. In the epic poem, Homer describes how Circe challenges the men who arrive at her island, writing,

The goddess, rising, asks her guests to stay,
Who blindly follow where she leads the way ...
Soon in the luscious feast themselves they lost,
And drank oblivion of their native coast.
Instant her circling wand the goddess waves,
To hogs transforms them, and the sty receives. (p. 159-60, 162-65).

Circe tests their ability to resist temptation and when they fail, she turns them into pigs using a potion. Milton uses Circe to define the unworthy described in *Apology for Smectymnuus*. The men who could not resist the temptation of Circe's feast represent the unchaste. They are unworthy of virtue's cup because they failed to practice temperance and refrain from having sexual relations. By knowing who isn't worthy, it can be deduced that the chaste are the worthy.

The chaste are worthy of virtue's cup because they resisted the temptation of lust. Therefore, they're able to partake in marital sex whilst maintaining their vows to chastity. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes how marriage unifies a chaste couple and consequently condones their sex. In Book VIII, God creates Eve and marries her to Adam, joining them so that "they shall be one Flesh, one Heart, one Soul" (ll. 499). Since Adam and Eve are both virgins and their bodies are unified by marriage, their sex cannot be unclean. This is supported by Adam and Eve's consummation of their marriage, as Raphael describes this, saying,

Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure
Desiring; nor restrain'd conveyance need
As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul. (ll. 626-28).

The couple definitively has sex and yet Eve does not lose her virginity until after the fall. It is not until Adam discovers that Eve has eaten the fruit, in Book IX, that he describes her as deflowered, saying, “How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost, / Defac’t, deflow’r’d, and now to Death devote” (ll. 901). He laments her fate but ultimately joins her because he loves her. After the fall, Adam professes,

O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear
 To that false Worm, of whomsoever taught
 To counterfeit Man’s voice, true in our fall, ...
 Which leaves us naked thus, of Honor void,
 Of Innocence, of Faith, of Purity,
 Our wonted Ornaments now soil’d and stain’d,” (ll. 1067-69, 1074-76).

The couple’s inability to resist temptation caused their defilement, not the act of marital sex. They were stripped of their chastity because they were no longer worthy of it, but while they were both pure and married, they could not defile one another through sex.

In *Apology for Smectymnuus*, Milton describes a cup of love and chastity that virtue offers to those who are worthy. This depiction represents how the chaste are worthy of partaking in marital sex without breaking their vows of chastity. The union of a pure marriage prevents any uncleanness within the marriage bed because the couple is of one body, and neither are defiled by sex. Milton defends his chastity through this belief, as he marries and has children within his lifetime but is simultaneously devoted to being chaste.

References

Homer. (1880). *The Odyssey* (A. Pope, Trans.). Houghton, Osgood, and Company.