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PERFORMING MASCULINITY IN PARADISE LOST

Kent R. Lehnhof

IN *FEMALE MASculINITIES* Judith Halberstam objects that critical and theoretical approaches to sex/gender systems have paid too much attention to anatomy. In particular, she faults studies of masculinity for focusing almost exclusively on the white male body and its effects. By delimiting masculinity in this way, Halberstam argues, we counterproductively confine ourselves to those manifestations of masculinity with which we are already intimately familiar. Urging an ampler vision, Halberstam calls for the examination of alternative masculinities, particularly those performed by agents who are not male by birth or biology.¹

When we read Milton with Halberstam in mind, we realize something simple but significant: Adam is the epic's only male. Aside from him, all of the characters we tend to think of in masculine terms—the Father and the Son, Raphael and Michael, Satan and Beelzebub—are not, strictly speaking, male at all. As the narrator advises, spiritual beings have no stable sex:

For Spirits when they please
Can either Sex assume, or both; so soft
And uncompounded is thir Essence pure,
Not ti'd or manac'd with joynt or limb,
Not founded on the brittle strength of bones,
Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose
Dilated or condens't, bright or obscure,
Can execute thir aerie purposes,
And works of love or enmity fulfill.²

(PL 1.423–31)

Raphael elaborates on this sexual indeterminism when he affirms that angels “limb themselves” in whatever fashion suits their present fancy:

All Heart they live, all Head, all Eye, all Eare,
All Intellect, all Sense, and as they please,
They Limb themselves, and colour, shape or size
Assume, as likes them best, condense or rare.

(6.350–53)

That angels elect to put on gendered roles and sexed shapes to fulfill “thir aerie purposes” indicates that masculinity and femininity are meaningful—to say nothing of delightful—aspects of eternal existence. But gender's cosmic importance does not necessitate or even imply specific configurations or immutable assignations. At least at the level of individual angels, gender is superfluous. It can be adopted, altered, and abandoned without affecting essence, identity, or character. As a function of theatrical “assuming” and substantial “limbing,” angelic gender is performative and prosthetic, undoing the idea of innate or permanent maleness among the angels. As Benjamin Lourence observes, Milton's angels possess gender only to the extent that they perform it.³ When the spirits of *Paradise Lost* enact masculine roles, they do so in the absence of the intrinsic maleness with which masculinity is supposed to be coterminous.

Nevertheless, the masculinity of these nonmale agents is quite convincing. Indeed, Adam is so taken with the gendered performances of the angels that he imagines heaven to be populated exclusively with “Spirits Masculine.” Reproaching Eve after the Fall, Adam complains:

O why did God,
Creator wise, that peopl'd highest Heav'n
With Spirits Masculine, create at last
This noveltie on Earth, this fair defect
Of Nature, and not fill the World at once
With Men as Angels without Feminine,
Or find some other way to generate
Mankind?

(10.888–95)

In describing the angels as “Spirits Masculine,” Adam perhaps means something like “agents who perform masculinity to perfection” or even “agents who perform masculinity so perfectly that they (unlike me) never fall into effeminacy.” If Adam's comment aims at anything more literal or concrete, it runs contrary to the more credible testimonies of Raphael and the narrator and should probably be taken as one more manifestation of the faulty thinking that afflicts him after the Fall. To the extent that “Spirits Masculine” gestures toward angelic sex rather than angelic gender, Roy Flannagan is right to advise that Adam's utterance is “misleading, even distorted.”⁴

But it is easy to see how Adam might conclude that the angels are all male, for the messengers who visit him invariably present themselves in manly guise. On this count, Milton's angels behave rather conventionally. As Feisal Mohamed notes, angels in medieval and Renaissance paintings customarily reflect the sexual features of those they visit. Divine messengers addressing themselves to women tend to assume a feminine aspect, while

angels sojourning with men typically take on a masculine form.⁵ Milton's angels follow suit, as can be seen in Michael's choice to approach Adam "Not in his shape Celestial, but as Man / Clad to meet man" (*PL* 11.239–40).

So compellingly do Michael and the other angels clad themselves "as Man" that Adam is not the only one to forget that none of the epic's spiritual agents are actually male. The maleness of Milton's angels has seemed so certain that several scholars have felt compelled to comment on the "homosexual" heaven that appears to follow from Milton's decision to confer a full sexual life upon the angels. C. S. Lewis, for instance, took pains to deny that homosexuality had any part in Milton's "real meaning," while William Empson reasoned that homosexuality makes a certain amount of sense, given "Milton's attitude toward women."⁶ Robert Graves also addressed the issue, conjecturing that Milton betrayed his own sexual inclinations by allowing his male angels to love one another.⁷

The convincing masculinity that is the hallmark of Milton's angels, though, contrasts with that of Adam, the epic's only male. Although the description of Adam in Book Four indicates that manliness permeates every part of his being—from his fair, large front to his hyacinthine locks—our first father proves incapable of sustaining it. In what amounts to a catastrophic lapse, Adam allows himself to be "fondly overcome with Femal charm" (*PL* 9.999). This uxorious capitulation involves a loss of masculinity as well as a loss of status. The Son says as much when he chides the newly fallen Adam: "Thou did'st resigne thy Manhood, and the Place / Wherein God set thee" (10.148–49). To be sure, Adam's inability to maintain his "Manhood" is what turns the poetical and historical plots of *Paradise Lost*. Michael reminds Adam of this when showing him the aftereffects of the Fall. As Adam contemplates a global outpouring of sin and vice, the angel utters the awful, all-encompassing truth: "From Mans effeminate slackness it begins" (11.634).

The situation is similar in *Samson Agonistes*, where the eponymous hero's sin arises from and eventuates in effeminacy. Cognizant that he could have kept his blessed estate with nothing more than "a grain of manhood well resolv'd," Samson is left to lament the easiness with which he "Gave up my fort of silence to a Woman" (*SA* 408, 236). When no rope or chain was strong enough to bind him, "foul effeminacy held me yok't" (*SA* 410). This emasculating enslavement marks the end both of Samson's strength and his manhood. Revealing just how precarious is the masculinity of Milton's male characters, not even the Herculean Hebrew is proof against its loss. Samson impotently mutters that he was "Effeminatly vanquish't" (*SA* 562).

Curiously, the compromised masculinity that figures so conspicuously in the characterizations of Adam and Samson is missing from the characteriza-

tion of Satan. Although charges of effeminacy are pervasive in Milton's works, serving as the standard label for those stuck in sin and error, Satan is never accused of being effeminate. The omission is odd, especially since allegations of effeminacy were all but inevitable in early modern descriptions of tyrannical rulers. It is ubiquitous in Milton's own writings against illegitimate kingship. As Gina Hausknecht reports, there are more accusations of effeminacy in *Eikonoklastes* than anywhere else in Milton's oeuvre.⁸ Thus, when Milton describes the reign of a morally depraved English king, he repeatedly resorts to a discourse of effeminacy. But when he describes the reign of a morally depraved infernal king, Milton omits the accusation altogether.

This is not to say that the poem approves of Satan's sadomasochistic machismo.⁹ *Paradise Lost* opposes itself in many ways to Satan's exaggerated masculinity. But the poem articulates this opposition without alleging that Satan has fallen into effeminacy. Satan's gendered status, unlike Adam's, is never said to slip. His masculinity may be perverse, but it is also—at least by this measure—persistent. Neither the narrator nor any of the epic's other voices announces its loss. Adam's masculinity, however, is impugned on a number of occasions and by a number of authorities, including Raphael, Michael, and the Son. Each of these authorities associates the Fall (either prospectively or retrospectively) with Adam's inability to uphold his manhood in the face of Eve's feminine attractiveness. In their first postlapsarian exchange, the Son makes it clear where and how Adam went wrong:

Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey
Before his voice, or was shee made thy guide,
Superior, or but equal, that to her
Thou did'st resigne thy Manhood, and the Place
Wherein God set thee above her made of thee,
And for thee, whose perfection farr excell'd
Hers in all real dignitie.

(*PL* 10.145–51)

According to the Son, Adam's transgression is simultaneously a misvaluation and miscarriage of masculinity. As Raphael has feared in Book Eight, Adam allows his manhood to fall degraded in Eve's presence and surrenders to her seeming superiority.

This dynamic could have been duplicated with little difficulty in the satanic subplot. Sin could easily have assumed the role of an Eve or a Dalila, enchanting her mate with womanly beauty, and Satan could easily have played the part of an Adam or a Samson, allowing himself to become infatuated and enthralled. Yet Milton's Satan is not overthrown by his ardor. Even in his earliest interactions with Sin, Satan forgets neither himself nor his

place. Unlike Adam, Satan is not drawn to his lover by an alluring feminine alterity that blinds him to his own merits. Rather, Satan desires Sin because she reminds him of himself. As Sin observes,

I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft
Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam'st enamour'd.

(2.762–65)

By stipulating that Satan's desire is narcissistic instead of uxorious, *Paradise Lost* places the adversary outside of the effeminating scenario played out in paradise. In so doing, the poem distinguishes between Adam's fall, which is repeatedly associated with a loss of masculinity, and Satan's fall, which is not.

At least at a certain level, then, Satan's gender performance can be said to outstrip Adam's. The superiority of angelic gender, of course, is even more apparent among the unfallen angels. Michael, for instance, is a paragon of masculinity, presented to the reader as one "prime / In Manhood" (11.245–46). To recognize that this remarkable manhood has no anatomical warrant is to begin to appreciate the extent to which Milton's poem unstitches the traditional ties between maleness and masculinity.

According to Hausknecht, one can see Milton worrying these ties in his prose writings. Her careful survey of the prose shows that though Milton habitually uses terms such as "manly" and "masculine" to describe those who are committed to civic virtue and Christian liberty, this seemingly sexist rhetoric is "about the mind, and very specifically not about the body." In Milton's prose, manliness is primarily a moral classification with no necessary connection to morphology. Men can be insufficiently masculine, and women are not precluded from taking up "masculine" moral positions. In other words, masculinity in the prose is gendered but not sexed. As Hausknecht explains, Milton's usage opens up a space for gender that does not rule out assumptions based on sex but nevertheless indicates that "those assumptions are not totalizing."¹⁰

The "space opened up for gender" in the prose is pried further apart in *Paradise Lost*. Its measure can be taken in the manliness of the angels and the effeminacy of Adam. Although Milton's angels perform their masculinity in the absence of the essential or anatomical condition that is supposed to certify it, their simulated virility is far more stable than the manhood physically embodied in Adam. The situation that ensues is highly paradoxical: the characters in *Paradise Lost* who are not "really" (that is, substantially) male seem secure in their masculinity, while the lone character who is "really" male cannot keep from becoming effeminate. That the poem's sexually indeterminate spirits enact masculinity more enduringly than Adam suggests that

maleness in Milton's epic—even as it is supposed to serve as a source of authority, power, and rule—is nevertheless attended by a certain vulnerability. In other words, the sexism traditionally attributed to Milton's poem is not as self-assured as has been assumed. Insofar as the poem bases men's authority in their bodies and tries to translate anatomy into destiny, it catches up the male subject in a perplexing contradiction. The bodily state that would legitimize masculine privilege simultaneously limits it.

It is illuminating to consider this contradictory condition as a manifestation of what Kathryn Schwarz calls the "mutual dependence" of men's sexual and heroic agency in the early modern period. Schwarz elaborates on this interdependence in the context of another English epic, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Schwarz's reading of *The Faerie Queene* focuses on Britomart, the love-struck maid who outfits herself as a knight and sets off in search of her future husband. What interests Schwarz in this transvestite narrative is the tremendous success that Britomart enjoys in her assumed role. Britomart's feigned masculinity not only works but works better. Whereas Spenser's male knights invariably fall out of their chivalric roles the moment they lower their weapons, Britomart's masculine heroism withstands foreplay as well as swordplay.¹¹

According to Schwarz, Britomart's successes (as well as the failures of her male peers) are the direct result of a chivalric sex/gender system that seeks to naturalize the relationship between maleness and martial valor through reciprocally reinforcing signs of manhood, particularly the sword and the penis. By requiring that "real" manhood possess all the appropriate parts—that there be a "visible causality" linking bodies to actions—this chivalric model aims to make masculinity the exclusive property of males. But the exact and exacting equivalency between penis/sword and male body/heroic masculinity is not without risk. When masculinity is made coextensive with sexual identity, every performative lapse becomes at one and the same time a castration. As Schwarz observes, "For men, chivalric heroism sets up a mutual dependence of sexual and martial agency, equating heroic victory and sexual potency, sexual failure and heroic defeat: male heroes claim the absolute condition of possession and become vulnerable to absolute loss."¹²

Britomart, of course, occupies this signifying structure differently. For her, the artifacts of manliness "are not fetishes or metaphors, but objects that get things done." "Her performance produces effects," Schwarz advises, "without essentializing cause." And while Britomart's femaleness does not afford her the naturalized authority of the epic's "authentic" men, it also exempts her from emasculation. Britomart performs masculinity without fear of castration and, consequently, becomes the epic's most impressive man. As Schwarz concludes, *The Faerie Queene* "creates a fissure in heroic referen-

tiality," proving "that manhood is most effective when it is most incongruously embodied."¹³

Paradise Lost can be said to make a similar point. The most durable masculinities in Milton's poem belong to those who have no stable sexual identity and therefore enact masculinity without maleness. Whereas Adam's manhood is perpetually imperiled by the mutual dependencies inherent in a naturalized gender ideology, the masculinity of Milton's angels is all the more sure for being "incongruously embodied." Even the fallen Satan plays his masculine part more enduringly than the all-male Adam. Although Adam's sexual identity ostensibly authorizes his masculine privilege, the penis/sword cuts both ways so that Adam's inability to fulfill his masculine role ultimately calls his manhood into question. The naturalized link between anatomy and agency that would ensure Adam's preeminence necessarily jeopardizes it. On this matter, Schwarz's phrasing is apt: Adam claims "the absolute condition of possession" only by becoming "vulnerable to absolute loss."

Within this framework—where possession proves so problematic—we discover one possible source of Eve's power over Adam. Adam refers to this power when describing for Raphael the disarming effect she has on him:

so absolute she seems
And in her self compleat, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, vertuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her
Looses discount'nanc't, and like folly shewes. (8.547–53)

Several readers have tried to account for Adam's response by searching for something that Eve possesses in greater abundance than her husband. Helen Gardner, for instance, attributes Adam's admiration to an awareness that Eve has been disproportionately blessed by God, that she enjoys "the advantage in moral and spiritual qualities." James Stone posits an advantage that is not moral and spiritual but sexual. He claims that Eve, having been created from a man but fashioned into a woman, combines both sexes in herself and therefore encompasses "the independence and wholeness of the androgyne." Perhaps the most compelling interpretation of this kind comes from Marshall Grossman, who draws upon Lacan to demonstrate that what Eve has over Adam is a sense of self independent of another human being. Although Adam can see/behold/possess himself only as reflected in Eve's image, Eve gains her self-image much earlier—and apart from Adam—when she identifies with her own reflection in the lake.¹⁴

In light of Schwarz's theorization, however, it might be more apt to account for Adam's awe by pointing not to something Eve possesses but to something she lacks, namely Adam's vexed maleness. In other words, Eve might be more "compleat" not because she is better equipped than Adam but because she is less equipped. Since that which might be lost is not there to begin with, Eve is not susceptible to loss at the same level as Adam. As was the case with Schwarz's Britomart, Eve's missing maleness exempts her from absolute loss, affording her a relative invulnerability that Adam calls the "vertuousest" state of all.¹⁵

This paradox, in which the process of subtraction makes Eve more rather than less complete, is of a piece with the other, in which maleness makes Adam more rather than less susceptible to effeminacy. Both are endemic to an essentialized sex/gender system, and both add an element of complexity to the poem's apparent sexism. Although Eve's anatomy is supposed to imply subjection, Adam's physical form comes, over the course of the poem, to imply an insufficiency of its own. To the extent that the poem ties heroic masculinity to the male body, it subjects Adam's sexual agency to his success in sustaining his gender role. The first man remains a man only to the extent that he performs his masculinity to perfection. And while Adam's anatomy equips him for (and with) the manly part, it also apportions him an inevitable vulnerability that constantly threatens him with dispossession and emasculation.

Yet Schwarz's theorization is not entirely adequate to *Paradise Lost*—in part because Schwarz examines a model of masculinity that Milton explicitly rejects. Open in his disregard for the valor of "fabl'd Knights / In Battels feign'd," Milton turns away from chivalric masculinity to sing instead "the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" (9.30–32). And while Raphael's lengthy account of the war in heaven sits uneasily alongside this stated intent, betraying an abiding fascination for the chivalric values of valor and aggression, the poem's overall design honors its revisionist agenda. More to the point, however, is the fact that *Paradise Lost*'s participation in the essentializing sexual ideologies that Schwarz anatomizes is attenuated. Milton's poem does not limit itself to a single sexual theory, essentialist or otherwise. Instead, it leverages contradictory theories against one another in such a way as to complicate our analysis and problematize the natural relationship between maleness and masculine perfection the poem is often presumed to promote.

To be sure, there are numerous passages in the poem that affirm men's natural, ontological superiority. In Book Four's excursus on human anatomy, for instance, the elevation of the male and the subordination of the female are said to follow inevitably from their respective forms:

For contemplation hee and valour form'd,
 For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
 Hee for God only, shee for God in him:
 His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd
 Absolute rule; and Hyacinthin Locks
 Round from his parted forelock manly hung
 Clustering, but not beneath his shoulders broad:
 Shee as a vail down to the slender waste
 Her unadorned golden tresses wore
 Disshevel'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
 As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
 Subjection.

(4.297-308)

Adam's expansive forehead, imperious eye, and "manly" forelocks manifest his right to rule, while Eve's "wanton ringlets . . . / . . . which impli'd / Subjection" consign her to an inferior place in the human hierarchy. Yet as John Rogers observes, this anatomy-as-destiny account of the human pair follows an alternative description in which Adam and Eve are equally majestic and lordly:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
 Godlike erect, with native Honour clad
 In naked Majestie seemd Lords of all,
 And worthie seemd, for in thir looks Divine
 The image of thir glorious Maker shon,
 Truth, wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure,
 Severe but in true filial freedom plac'd;
 Whence true autoritie in men.

(4.288-95)

Neglecting to differentiate between male and female, this earlier description implies an essential sexual equality. According to Rogers, the contiguous yet contrasting accounts found in Book Four are characteristic of the poem's inconsistency on the question of sexual difference. In some places, the poem presents male supremacy as an immutable consequence of Creation, as a basic fact of nature. In other places, however, it presents Adam's preeminence as an arbitrary assignation without physical or spiritual warrant. In this latter depiction, the inequitable sexual hierarchy of Eden derives from divine fiat rather than any real disparity between male and female. Eve is required to obey Adam not because he is ontologically superior but because God has arbitrarily ordained that this be so. "What thou bidst," Eve says to Adam, "Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains" (4.635-36; my emphasis). According to Rogers, the antiessential account, in which male authority is merely ordained, is the more authentic of the poem's competing ideologies. He claims that the sexual essentialism of *Paradise Lost* is only "half-hearted" and ul-

timately gives way to the "dominant conviction" that maleness entails no natural or ontological advantages.

But if the poem's essentialism is inauthentic, why is it present at all? Rogers speculates that the poem's inconsistent approach to sexual difference is strategic, allowing the author to sidestep theodical difficulties while also adding plausibility to the plot. In this view, the passages affirming the naturalness of sexual inequality operate as a provocation or temptation that goes some distance toward explaining the Fall. What motivates Eve to stray away from Adam and sin against God is the resentment she feels for a hierarchical subordination that is provocative precisely because it is said to be natural but has no real basis beyond the arbitrary command of God. Thus, the sexual essentialism of Milton's text is not its truth but its temptation.¹⁶

Ironically, many of Milton's readers have given in to this temptation and have placed too much weight on the passages asserting man's ontological superiority. The *Paradise Lost* that results from this reading—aside from being supremely sexist—is highly unstable. Its sex/gender system readily deconstructs, fracturing along the lines of essentialism's inherent contradictions. Rightly seen, however, Milton's epic is not undone by the contradictions of sexual essentialism so much as the poem deliberately exploits them. It is no accident that Adam's anatomically authorized masculinity is exceeded by the masculinity of those who perform gender without fixed sexual essences. Foregrounding the fragility of a sex/gender system that tries to naturalize the relationship between gendered behaviors and sexed bodies, Adam's maleness proves to be a liability as well as an asset. By attending to the instability of Adam's masculinity, we begin to see that sexual essentialism does not destabilize Milton's poem; rather, Milton's poem destabilizes sexual essentialism. When assessing the sexual politics of *Paradise Lost*, we would do well to remember that the epic's manliest agents are not technically men at all. In Milton's poem, masculine perfection may be done in drag.

Yet even this conclusion can be pushed further, for though it comprehends the uncertain relationship between masculinity and maleness in Milton's poem, it does not encompass the ambivalent relationship between masculinity and effeminacy. The two would seem to be antithetical, but the poem suggests in many ways that effeminacy is not necessarily at odds with virtuous masculinity. If effeminate slackness, for instance, were nothing more than an impediment to manly perfection—if it were simply a source of sin and suffering—then Satan's unyielding masculinity would surely represent the best gendered position of all. Notwithstanding his humiliating defeats and endless torments, Satan never succumbs to the unmanly lassitude that overwhelms Adam. The closest he comes is in Book Nine, when the sight of Eve's "soft" and "Feminine" form momentarily overawes his malice:

Her graceful innocence, her every Aire
 Of gesture or lest action overaw'd
 His Malice, and with rapine sweet bereav'd
 His fierceness of the fierce intent it brought:
 That space the Evil one abstracted stood
 From his own evil, and for the time remaind
 Stupidly good, of enmitie disarm'd,
 Of guile, of hate, of envie, of revenge. (PL 9.458–66)

This is the nearest Satan gets to “effeminate slackness”—and it is the nearest he gets to salvation. If the Adversary were at this point to surrender to Eve’s feminine grace, he would undoubtedly be better off. If Satan were to allow himself to be fondly overcome with female charm, he might be brought to good. But as he always does, Satan refuses to relinquish his masculine rigidity. Drawing himself erect, he advances upon Eve in an attempt to violate her innocence. As is the case elsewhere, Satan is “hard’nd more by what might most reclame” and resolutely retains what are his most salient qualities: “obdurate pride and stedfast hate” (6.791, 1.58). The poem’s consistent characterization of Satan as obdurate, unmoved, steadfast, fixed, firm, and hard would seem to locate him as far from effeminate slackness as one might imagine. Yet all this phallic hardness ultimately amounts to a critical debility rather than an admirable immunity.

And this brings us back to the effeminate slackness of Adam. While it is true that Adam is noisily reproved for resigning his manhood, there is nevertheless something admirable about Adam’s “unmanly” act. Submitting to female charm and electing to stay with Eve certainly seems more virtuous than the alternative: to cast her out to sicken and die. The intimation that Adam’s effeminate slackness might not be altogether ignoble is strengthened in Book Eleven, when Adam is again unmanned, this time bereft of his “best of Man” by a grim pageant of human death:

Sight so deform what heart of Rock could long
 Drie-ey’d behold? *Adam* could not, but wept,
 Though not of Woman born; compassion quell’d
 His best of Man, and gave him up to tears
 A space, till firmer thoughts restrain’d excess,
 And scarce recovering words his plaint renew’d. (11.494–99)

Adam’s compassionate response to those in the throes of death perhaps expresses insufficient faith or inadequate self-control, but the narrator’s claim that Adam’s tears could have been prevented only if his heart had been made of stone assures us that Adam’s lapsed masculinity, at least in this moment, is a manifestation of his better self. Manly grace may be the *sumum bonum* of

Milton’s text, but this virtuous masculinity appears to admit—maybe even require—effeminateness after a certain fashion.

Taken together, the two moments in the poem in which Adam is unmanned suggest that he falls into effeminacy when pushed by feelings of love and compassion. He is effeminized by his love for Eve in Book Nine and by his compassion for the dying in Book Eleven. In each instance, Adam allows his otherwise ennobling feelings of love for others to conflict with his feelings of love for God. It is not that Adam experiences “unmanly” passions (such as love and compassion) but that he experiences these passions in an unmanly manner (that is, at variance with faith and obedience). The notion of effeminacy that emerges is focused on affective states and scarcely glances at anatomy or essence. In this way, the poem performs yet another antiessentializing gesture—and it offers yet another explanation as to why Satan never falls into effeminacy. Simply put, Satan does not possess the requisite emotions. His feelings of love for others can never conflict with his feelings of love for God because he has neither the one nor the other. Selfishness is Satan’s fail-safe defense against effeminacy.

On the other side of the spectrum are the unfallen angels. Their masculinity is secured not by selfishness but by the self-sameness of their sympathies. They never fall into effeminacy—even though they put on and put off masculinity at will—because their love and compassion are always harmonious with their faith and obedience. What keeps the angels from effeminate slackness is not the phallic hardness of the Adversary but another kind of erection altogether: the moral erection of “th’ upright heart and pure” (1.18).

Adam is somewhere in between the Adversary and the angels. Unlike Satan, Adam knows how to love. But unlike the angels, he does not know how to direct his love so it does not detract from his faith. His feelings for Eve eventually get the better of his feelings for God, and he suffers the unique fate of falling into effeminacy. The task that lies before him, however, is not to purge himself of effeminateness and become an impervious masculine subject after the manner of Satan. Hardening oneself against that which is “feminine” and “soft” might make one masculine in an impoverished, stereotypical sense (this is the masculinity of Satan), but it does not make one masculine in a fully virtuous, Miltonic sense (this is the masculinity of the angels). What Adam must do is learn from and follow after the upright angels, those sublime spirits who do not inoculate themselves against femininity but instead alter themselves to experience and express it.

By the time we reach the end of *Paradise Lost*, the presentation of sex and gender has taken so many turns that it is virtually impossible to match up sexual essences and moral standing in even the most rudimentary of relationships. Adam’s fall into effeminacy shows that maleness is not only insufficient

to ensure one's masculinity but also makes one more susceptible to its loss. Eve's apparent completeness paradoxically implies that anatomical "lack" is not always a liability. The masculinity of the angels and demons demonstrates that gender is most resilient when performed without sexual referent. And the moral ambivalence of Adam's effeminate slackness suggests that "masculine" virtue might not preclude effeminateness any more than it requires maleness. The cumulative effect of all this is to drive a wedge between sex and gender, to open up a space between maleness and manly excellence. Although *Paradise Lost* occasionally articulates an essentializing outlook in which goodness, virtue, and superiority naturally belong to the male sex, the poem troubles this perspective in important ways. In so doing, it constructs a complicated sex/gender system that is fundamentally antiessential. Within this sex/gender system, masculinity is not tethered to a particular anatomy. Manly perfection is first and foremost a role to be played. And it is telling that those who are not male often turn in the better performance.

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Notes

I wish to thank Feisal Mohamed, Daniel Shore, and an anonymous reader at *Milton Studies* for commenting on early versions of this essay.

1. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C., 1998), esp. 1–3.
2. All references to Milton's poetry are from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston, 1998); hereafter cited parenthetically by book and line number. It is unclear whether Milton's angels ordinarily have no sex/gender but occasionally assume it for specific operations, or whether Milton's angels are ordinarily "masculine" but occasionally play at femininity and androgyny. Neither formulation, however, affords the angels a stable sexual identity. Even if masculinity is the default or preferred angelic role, it remains a role since any angel at any moment could choose a different self-presentation or self-configuration.
3. Benjamin Lourence, "Of 'Spirits Masculine': (Un)Angelic Manhood in *Paradise Lost*" (paper presented at the conference of the Group for Early Modern Cultural Studies, 2005).
4. Flannagan, *The Riverside Milton*, 651n298.
5. Feisal Mohamed, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2006. Further discussion of Milton's angelology can be found in Feisal G. Mohamed, *In the Anteroom of Divinity: The Reformation of the Angels from Colet to Milton* (Toronto, 2008).
6. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (New York, 1961), 113; William Empson, *Milton's God*, rev. ed. (London, 1965), 106.
7. Robert Graves qtd. in Empson, *Milton's God*, 106.
8. Gina Hausknecht, "The Gender of Civic Virtue," in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin (Cambridge, 2004), 26.
9. William Shullenberger, "Wrestling with the Angel: *Paradise Lost* and Feminist Criticism," *MQ* 20 (1986): 70, deftly demonstrates how the poem resists characterizing Satan's masculinity as sadomasochistic.

10. Hausknecht, "Gender of Civic Virtue," 19, 32.
11. Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham, N.C., 2000), 150.
12. *Ibid.*, 151, 150.
13. *Ibid.*, 151, 171.
14. Helen Gardner, *A Reading of "Paradise Lost"* (Oxford, 1965), 87; James W. Stone, "Man's Effeminate S(lack)ness: Androgyny and the Divided Unity of Adam and Eve," *MQ* 31 (1997): 36; Marshall Grossman, "The Rhetoric of Feminine Priority and the Ethics of Form in *Paradise Lost*," *ELR* 33 (2003): 440.
15. As a participant in the Fall, Eve is not exempt from all loss, but the poem grants her a relative invulnerability by indicating that her lapses and losses are of a lesser order than Adam's. The Son suggests as much when he accepts Eve's confession without comment but answers Adam's with withering remarks about his unmanly behavior. Eve is also untouched by the loss Adam takes to be the worst of all: his inability to frequent the garden sites where God deigned to walk and talk with him. Lastly, Eve demonstrates her relative invulnerability by regaining her resolve more quickly than Adam. She is proposing hopeful solutions and moving in the direction of mercy long before Adam has left off lamenting.
16. Although John Rogers, "Transported Touch: The Fruit of Marriage in *Paradise Lost*," in Martin, *Milton and Gender*, 125, does not extend his analysis beyond Eve, it is possible to imagine how a misguided belief in male superiority might play a part in Adam's fall as well as Eve's. Conceivably, the false supposition that masculine perfection is an intrinsic and inalienable aspect of maleness would make Adam less attentive to the preservation of his manly grace and more likely to lapse into effeminate slackness. (The angels, for whom masculinity is a performative role, would make no such error.) In other words, the essentializing outlook that makes Eve sinfully insecure in her gender role might make Adam sinfully oversecure in his.