

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY: HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVES (HPHP4014)
THE DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE OF DIVORCE BY JOHN MILTON

EXERCISE ON HUMAN NATURE AND CHARITY

In going about arguing for a change to the law, Milton argues partly by indirection, saying that the combination of human folly and evil and the example of widespread human misunderstanding in, for example, the worship of God (e.g. the sacrifice of the Mass), all tend towards the necessity of allowing divorce. Look at how he does this in the following passage:

Book I, The Preface

➤ **Read from ‘Many men ...’ to ‘... sorrow and perplexitie.’**

Milton’s argument begins with a fairly unpromising assessment of **human nature**. He argues that although a common view is that if only humans were to be exempt from punishment by God in this life they would find immediate release from all evils, on the contrary, humans are themselves the causes of the evil they bring upon themselves, even by turning those things which God had intended for their human good to the occasion for sorrow and perplexity.

Milton’s assessment of human nature seems unpromising, until, that is, we realise that Milton is describing ‘the perverseness of our folly’ and not our nature in itself. Although it may not be apparent from the Preface, Milton’s prose is working towards an invocation of Nature as a guide in ethical matters. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton tells us directly what he means by ‘nature’:

- the ‘two prime statutes’ of nature are ‘to joyn it self to that which is good and acceptable and friendly; and to turn aside and depart from what is disagreeable, displeasing and unlike’.¹

Book I, Chapter 4

As an example of how the idea of Nature informs and guides Milton’s arguments, and indeed his reading of Scripture, we can take his comments in Book I, Chapter 3, on St Paul’s ungenerous concession that ‘It is better to marry than to burne’.

What this burning might mean in St Paul has been a matter for much debate. Some have thought that what Paul meant was that if a man lacked the self-discipline to abstain from sexual intercourse then it is better that he marry to satisfy his desire than to commit adultery or fornication by becoming sexually involved outside marriage, for adultery and fornication would lead to eternal damnation, hence the burning.

¹ Cited in Regina M. Schwartz, ‘Milton on the Bible’, Ch. 3 of *A Companion to Milton*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 37-54 (pp. 39-40).

Milton does not dismiss Paul's words as superstitious or ascetic; he is after all a believer. However, he suggests that the burning is in fact the desire and longing to be rid of unkindly solitariness, which is, in a sense, to say that it is better to be married with a compatible partner than to suffer alone the physical and emotional longing for intimate company.

Here we can turn to Milton's attempts to interpret **Scripture**, through whom God purportedly speaks, in support of his position. Milton's interpretations of the Bible are conducted with the thought of a theologian, the faith of a believer, and the sensibility of a poet.

- ❖ In answer to the question of what is this longing, this desire, this burning, he says that it is 'Certainly not the meer motion of carnall lust, not the meer goad of a sensitive desire', but rather, 'that desire which God put into *Adam* in Paradise ... that desire which God saw it was not good that man should be left alone to burn in; the desire and longing to put off unkindly solitariness by uniting another body, but not without a fit soule to his in the cheerfull society of wedlock.'
- ❖ If this was needful in Paradise, he argues, how much more needful is it now that humankind is fallen. And in a sentence that touches the sublimely poetic: 'Who hath the power to struggle with an intelligible flame, not in Paradise to be resisted, become now more ardent, by being fail'd of what in reason it lookt for.'²
- ❖ Milton seems to be suggesting, and perhaps not without covert reference to his own situation, that a person's reflection in solitude, in deprivation, explains to him the nature of desire, thus making loneliness theoretically intelligible, and thus increasing his desire.³

We can perhaps see from this example of Milton's interpretation of Paul in the light of Genesis, how Nature and charity (which means also 'Christian love') guide Milton's arguments and his interpretation of Scripture.

If Milton can be said to achieve the immense task in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* of reconciling Old Testament law with what Christ says in the New Testament, and to do so in a way that makes it seem that Christ had after all permitted divorce on grounds other than adultery, it is by insisting that Christ must be interpreted so as 'to preserve those his fundamental and superior laws of nature and charitie, to which all other ordinances give up their seals [of authority]'.⁴ 'Furthermore, in his charity, God has made available to human reason the justness and goodness – indeed the charity – of his laws. While many of God's way[s] are mysterious, this is not: "hee hath taught us to love and to extol his Lawes, not only as they are his, but as they are just and good to every wise and sober understanding"'.⁵ For the time in which it was written, this is 'an astonishing claim. Except for Nicolas Malebranche [...], none of the philosophers of this burgeoning age of reason – not even Descartes – was willing to make the claim that divine justice could be apprehended by human reason.'⁵

² Cited in Annabel Patterson, 'Milton, Marriage and Divorce', Ch. 17 of *A Companion to Milton*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 279-93 (p. 283).

³ Patterson, 'Milton, Marriage and Divorce', p. 283.

⁴ Cited in Schwartz, 'Milton on the Bible', p. 39.

⁵ Schwartz, 'Milton on the Bible', p. 40.