

Milton's Views of Marriage

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Abstract: The paper mainly discusses about Milton's views of marriage. The research direction of this paper belongs to the literature. So the study method of the paper is literature research. John Milton, as one of the most controversial poets in the British history, has a great influence to the later literature and thoughts and so on. One of the reasons why Milton is controversial is that some of his works are against the laws and morals of traditional British marriages which are mythologized by the Church. Milton's views of marriage reveal that Milton, as a humanist, can think highly of the personal nature and emphasis the secular happiness. At the same time, this is also an important part of Milton's views of freedom and has some practical significance.

Keywords: Milton; marriage; influence; Paradise Lost

1. Introduction

This paper enables us to view and evaluate Milton objectively. Although Milton holds ideas that women also have rights to decide their marriages, they must obey their husbands to a certain degree. Hence, we know that Milton's thoughts have some certain progressive significance, but also have some limitations. This thesis aims to arouse people to consider the position of the female deeply and the understanding of the feminism.

2. Biography

John Milton (1608 – 1674) was an English poet, eristic, a knowledgeable man of writing, and an office-bearer for the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell. Milton is a representative of puritan literature. He has been fighting for the bourgeois democracy movement in his whole life. His master work *Paradise Lost*, *Homer Epic* and *The Divine Comedy* are called the three poems in the west.^[1]

2.1. Early Life

Milton was born in a British puritan family which is wealthy, philanthropic and respects knowledge. His father is a protestant and a rich notary whose hobby is music. His father is good at composing music. So because of the same hobby to art, his father continually supports Milton's pursuit of poem. In order to let Milton obtain a good development, his father sends him to a good school to study and invites the most famous teachers to teach Milton Italian, French, music and other similar courses that enabled Milton to master skills of classical learning, linguistic and poem. Milton loves to study when he is a little child, besides he has a lofty ideal and perfect moral character. Milton did not go to bed until the midnight since he was 12 years old and he is great zeal for knowledge.

2.2. The Student Days at Cambridge

In 1625 when Milton entered Cambridge, he started to write poems. Milton is deeply influenced by Bacon. Bacon takes the rationalism and emphasizes that the forerunner of knowledge is power. In 1632, Milton obtained his master degree. The most particularly valuable thing is that Milton's father did not ask Milton to be a clergy after Milton graduated from Cambridge and got his master degree. However, his father allows Milton to go on to study blithely at their cottage for almost five years. Then Milton had been continuing his study of literature for six years. He fully wanted to get a great work on poems.

2.3. *The Experience of Travel*

In 1638, Milton traveled to the cultural center of Europe—Italy where he could get more knowledge. He visited many scholars in Italy, including Galileo who was put in chains by the Roman Catholic Church among the scholars. Milton was deeply moved by Galileo's spirit that he insisted the truth even though when he was in prison.

2.4. *Milton and His Three Wives*

In Milton's lifetime, he has three marriages and three experiences are the same. The criteria of choosing a mate is alike, that is his three wives are much younger than him. His first wife is seventeen years old when they get married. His second wife is eighteen years old younger than him and the third wife is even thirty years old younger than him. Milton's first wife passed away unfortunately in 1652 when she gives birth to their fourth child and the fourth child died, too. Four years after his first wife's death, that is 1656, Milton gets married with Katherine who is nearly twenty years old younger than him. Milton doesn't see his loved wife, because he has been blind in 1652. Yet they appear serenely in love and they live with great happiness. After Katherine has lived with Milton for nearly 15 months, she and their newborn baby girl pass away. Milton is painfully sad. Until 1663, Milton gets married again with Elizabeth who is 30 years younger than him. This marriage is the most happiness among his three marriages.^[2]

3. Milton's View of Marriage

As the most outstanding English poet in 17th century, Milton's ideal marriage is full of romantic atmosphere. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, his marriage is not so much happy and makes him hope to end up with the awkward state of life as soon as possible. As we all know, however, marriages are controlled strictly by the government of the United Kingdom at that time. Husbands cannot come up with divorce unless their wives have adulteries with other men. This kind of limit about individuals and the liberty of the family life deeply hurt Milton's heart. According to his own miserable experience, Milton accuses the law which forces to maintain the marriages without love. His opinions of love and marriage are much more advanced than other contemporaries.

3.1. *The Views of Marriage in Paradise Lost*

Paradise Lost is written by Milton when he is blind. It is a masterpiece in the 17th century poetic scene and is often regarded as the magnificent epic in the English poetic history. *Paradise Lost* contains other meanings—Milton reviews love in his lifetime of experiences.

3.1.1 *The absolute obedience of women is the prerequisite of a happy and sweet marriage.*

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton reveals the big differences between the male and the female through describing the figures of Adam and Eve. Adam is full of masculinity and Eve is soft and beautiful. Milton speaks highly of Eve's good quality such as kind heart, beauty, chastity and so on. In fact, the poet's describing clearly reflects the love and marriage of Milton in the real life. In the *Paradise Lost*, Eve puts his heart and soul into the love to Adam and Adam is the whole world to her. Milton writes: "my creature, as long as you ordered, I obey and never argue. Your law is God. My law is you; in addition, this is a great happiness and a woman's reputation. Talk to you, I always forgets the time, as well as the season transformation." So in poet's eyes, Eve is the most "popular women" because of her absolute obedience to Adam. Milton's attitude toward marriages is built on the basis of inequality. His attitude toward marriages contains a strong religious male chauvinism.^[3]

3.1.2 *Loyalty and sharing weal and woe with each other are the foundation of love and marriage.*

Milton pursues the pure love. He looks forward to it and believes that love is full of enthusiasm. He writes in *Paradise Lost*,^[4] Thus it can be seen that Milton longs for pure love. The pure love reflects his understanding of marriages and love, loyalty, sharing weal and woe. It can also be seen from the describing of the marriage life of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Combined with Milton's three unfortunate marriage experiences, we can find that Milton has high hopes for a happy marriage and a sweet love. He believes that a happy marriage and a sweet love are based on the loyalty and sharing weal and woe with each other.

3.1.3 Love and marriages are necessary.

Milton thinks that love and marriages are necessary and it is very important for individuals, God and the whole order of the universe. In *Paradise Lost*, when Adam lives alone, he is surrounded by many creatures. In Adam's mind, Eve is not only his spouse, but also a part of his life. This kind of joy which is finding the most intimate person is other people hard to imagine. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes Adam's mood at that time from the view of first person which can help us deeply understand the emotion of the poet when he is writing. So Milton believes that God determines to combine the male with the female when the God creates the human beings. This is in line with the nature and the laws of the universe, as Adam and Eve. [5] It extends the Milton's argument that people should have marriage, and then they can have a happy and meaningful life. From the view of the religion, it also accords with potential implies that the God creates the human beings.

3.2. Advocating the freedom of Marriages

Milton's attitude toward women can be compared to any boy's thoughts on women changing as they age to men with experience. From the experience of his marriages above, we know that Milton's first two marriages are unfortunate, but the last one is wonderful since he has been close to the old age, Milton is blind and his mood begins to calm. Therefore, he starts to summarize his marriages, especially his third marriage.

3.2.1 Defense for Divorce

He bravely speaks out his judgment about marriages, which he makes an effort to pursue the liberty of marriages. Milton is the first poet to defend the divorce. He writes many pamphlets (from 1643 to 1645) to support divorce which refers to *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, The Judgment of Martin Bucer, Tetrachordon, and Colasterion*. The first pamphlet—*The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes, From the Bondage of Canon Law*, was printed in 1643. [2] The second edition of this pamphlet came out in 1644. In his most controversial pamphlets, he explains the reason why he supports divorce. He argues that disharmonious relationships between husband and wife will cause havoc and it contradicts the order of God's Genesis. At the same time when Milton evaluates marriages, he takes women's need into consideration and gives women more autonomy in the marriages. He thinks that women have the same rights to come up with the divorces as men do so.

3.2.2 Realistic Significance

Milton opposed against some laws and moral foundations of Britain's traditional marriages that were deified by church. Milton required that marriages should be created on the base of love and he advocates the idea of the equality between males and females. As a humanist, Milton thinks highly of the personal feeling of natural instincts and emphasizes the secular happiness. He appeals that the church can relax restriction on divorces and relieves the restriction of unity of body and soul which is denied by laws and *the Bible*. He holds the ideas that respects and communications between male and female are more important than the female's compliance to the male. Until three hundred years later, British women can get the rights to sue for divorces. We can clearly know that this idea of Milton has a great foresightedness judgment.

4. Milton and Feminism

John Milton as the most prominent thinker and revolutionary, of course, his thought about the priority of the sexes has a deep influence on feminism. We can obviously see this influence through some following female writers' works. Now let us illustrate three female writers to analyze the relation between Milton and feminism.

4.1. Lady Mary Chudleigh

One of the earliest citations of *Paradise Lost* that actually appeared in the 17th century came from the proto-feminist writer Lady Mary Chudleigh. Chudleigh dared to argue that a woman could be considered and should be considered as excellent a creature as a man. It means that women might actually be as ontologically valuable as men. And in making such a point, Chudleigh naturally had to confront the problem of the scriptural account of the priority of the sexes. The suggestion which many readers extract from the Book of Genesis in the *Bible* that the initial creation of the male of the species (Adam) seems to establish the privileged rank of the entire male sex. So Chudleigh attempts to

demonstrate that the Genesis story of Adam and Eve establishes nothing. She believes: some theologians tell us that in the frame of this world, God proceeded from the less to the more perfect. And according to them, the women who have been created at last will not be a very great argument to debase the dignity of the Female sex.

The great Milton can be invoked here because he has already been established as an authority. He has already been established as a figure whose every word possesses something like an indisputable cultural power. So as a very “grave author” which Chudleigh is implying, Milton can tell us something potentially true about the priority of the sexes. It has been said that to quote anybody is necessarily to misrepresent him, and this fact is obviously a very good thing for Lady Mary Chudleigh since Milton himself would certainly not want to suggest that women are superior to men. In fact, Milton soon goes on in *paradise Lost*: Milton berates Adam for his overvaluation of his wife through the Archangel Raphael. Chudleigh identifies Milton as a cultural authority. Milton is a power, a figure that could be called upon to supply the voice of tradition in itself. He can be called upon in fact exactly as he is by Lady Mary Chudleigh here.

4.2. Mary Astell

Milton is discussed in a very different manner a year later in a work published by Mary Astell in 1700 and in an even more remarkably feminist cry for the liberation of women from what she describes and characterizes as domestic oppression. Astell writes that patience and submission are the comforts and they are only left to the poor people who groan under tyranny, unless they are strong enough to break the yoke. Not Milton himself will advocate liberty to the poor female slaves, or plead for the lawfulness of resisting a tyranny.

So Milton for Astell is not the embodiment of orthodoxy as that he is for Lady Mary Chudleigh. For Astell, Milton remains the subversive revolutionary whose treaties against the tyranny of the Stuart monarchy; Milton remains the subversive revolutionary whose treaties against the tyranny of Charles the First. All of these establish his reputation as a liberator, a liberator of all of the oppressed and enslaved citizens of England. However, Astell resents Milton here, and what she resents is the limitation of his subversiveness. He refused to extend his critique of tyranny in the political realm to a critique of men’s domestic tyranny over women in the private realm of the domestic sphere. We have to say that Mary Astell’s image of Milton is probably the product of a much closer reading of *Paradise Lost* than Lady Mary Chudleigh’s is. Astell certainly seems to have noticed Milton’s notorious and deplorable line in *Paradise Lost* about God’s creation of Adam and Eve. Milton’s narrator tells us God’s creation of Adam and Eve. Mary Astell is clearly responding to this. She distinguishes Milton’s cry against political tyranny from her own critique, her own cry against the patriarchal tyranny. She exposes something and we can see here is the proximity of Milton’s rhetoric of political liberation to the proto-feminist rhetoric of domestic liberation that is just the beginning to emerge at the end of the 17th century. A dead Milton could influence a social power that had nothing to do with the living Milton’s own social views.^[5]

4.3. Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf wrote about Milton during the 1920s. It is Woolf’s image that is probably the one which is most firmly rooted in the minds of Milton’s readers today. For Virginia Woolf, especially in *A Room of One’s Own*, the dead writer Milton exercises an active power at the present moment as he forces his female readers to accept their subordinate place in society; and the text of Milton, and especially of *Paradise Lost*, therefore has to be seen as an active, persistently malignant conveyor of patriarchal oppression. However, it seemed that he rejected this idea in 1924. In 1942, Woolf was beginning to formulate her feminist critique of the masculine traditions. She thought that the masculine of literary writing is a tradition. And she is not only just one of the first literary critics to reveal that most famous writers have been men, but also she is one of the first literary critics to reveal that most famous writers have been writing as men. However, these writers are all of a simple character. They have revealed the influence of their sex directly and normally. But there is a class which keeps itself away from any contamination. Milton is their leader; with him are Landor, Sappho, Sir Thomas Browne, and Marvell. Feminists or anti-feminists, passionate or cold—whatever the romances or adventures of their private lives not a whiff of that mist attaches itself to their writing. It is pure, uncontaminated, sexless as the angels are said to be sexless.

These men exert the influence on the sexes in a manner that implicitly glorifies their masculinity,

implicitly glorifies all men, but this is not so with Milton. Like Lady Mary Chudleigh, Woolf holds up Milton as a powerful authority. Milton is the one who can authorize the revolution in women's writing that Virginia Woolf was beginning to prophesy here early in the 20th century. We can clearly see Milton's influence on Woolf's feminism. Near the conclusion of the perfectly extraordinary book *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf elaborates on her prophecy of a feminist future, a world in which women can be viewed as writers of no less stature and of no less power than men.

5. Conclusion

"Milton", the name "Milton" stops referring to a particular middle-class Londoner who was born in 1608 and begins to embody the very essence of the strange and inexplicable phenomenon that we call literary power. And the violence of this reaction is due in large part to our tendency to think of Milton and of Milton's works. This paper combines Milton's views of marriages with his influence on feminism. Milton cries up the liberty of marriages and argues that women also have rights to decide their marriages as the men do. It is the most advanced thought at that time in the west. According to the base of Milton's views of marriages, feminism starts growing. He let us think the position and rights of the female seriously. He enables the feminism starts growing from the Britain to the other countries.

It is practically impossible to begin a reading of Milton without the burden of innumerable prejudices and preconceptions. However, we should evaluate him more objectively. We should know that Milton has an important meaning to the people after him, such as feminism. Therefore, many things we are left to consider in the wake of the research of "Milton" and we need to do more further study about "Milton".

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