

Poetry and Virginitie

“I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps. And they sung as it were a new song before the throne . . . and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women: for they are virgins.” (Rev. 14:2-3).

“Next, (for heare me out now Readers) that I may tell ye whether my younger feet wander’d; I betook me among those lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemne canto’s the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings; & from hence had in renowne over all Christendome. There I read it in the oath of every Knight, that he should defend to the expence of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of Virgin or matron. . . Thus from the Laureat fraternity of Poets, riper yeares, and the ceaselesse round of study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy, but chiefly to the divine volumes of *Plato*, and his equall *Xenophon*. Where if I should tell ye what I learnt, of chastity and love, I means that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only vertue which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy. The rest are cheated with a thick intoxicating potion which a certain Sorceresse the abuser of loves name carries about; and how the first and chieftest office of love, begins and ends in the soule, producing those happy twins of her divine generation knowledge and vertue, with such abstracted sublimities as these, it might be worth your listning, Readers, as I may one day hope to have ye in a still time, when there shall be no chiding; not in these noises, the adversary as ye know, barking at the doore; or searching for me at the Burdello’s where it may be he has lost himselfe, and raps up without pittie the sage and rheumatick old *Prelatesse* with all her young *Corinthian Laity* to inquire for such a one. Last of all not in time, but as perfection is last, that care was ever had of me, with my earliest capacity not to be negligently train’d in the precepts of Christian Religion: This that I have hitherto related, hath bin to shew, that though Christianity had bin but slightly taught me, yet a certain reserv’dnesse of naturall disposition and morall discipline learnt out of the noblest Philosophy was enough to keep me in disdain of farre lesse incontinences then this of the Burdello. But having had the doctrine of holy Scripture unfolding those chaste and high mysteries with timeliest care infus’d, that *the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body*, thus also I argu’d to my selfe; that if unchastity in a woman whom Saint *Paul* terms the glory of man, be such a scandall and dishonour, then certainly in a man who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflouring and dishonourable. In that he sins both against his owne body which is the perfeter sex, and his own glory which is in the woman, and that which is worst, against the image and glory of God which is in himselfe. Nor did I slumber over that place expressing such high reward of ever accompanying the Lambe, with those celestially songs to others inapprehensible, but not to those who were not defil’d with women, which doubtlesse meanes fornication: For mariage must not be

call'd a defilement.”

--Milton, “An Apology [for Smectymnuus] Against a Pamphlet” (1642), in
Complete Prose Works (Yale, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 890-92.

“Some of late called me ‘the Lady.’ But why do I seem to them too little of a man?”

--Milton, to his college classmates (*Prolusion VI*, p. 865)

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

--1 Corinthians 13

SMECTYMNUUS

masque

Lord John Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater

Henry Lawes