

Ancient and Modern Criticism of Musical Queerness: Lil Nas X, Plato, and the Fifth-Century
“New Music”

The American rapper, singer, and songwriter Lil Nas X’s 2021 music video for “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” opens with a scene of the Garden of Eden, in which the Tree of Knowledge is inscribed with a quote from Plato’s *Symposium* (191a): ἐπειδὴ οὖν ἡ φύσις δίχα ἐτμήθη, ποθοῦν ἕκαστον τὸ ἥμισυ (“Now when our first form had been cut in two, each half in longing for its fellow...”). The quote has long been a topic of scholarly interest as it supposedly accepts and normalizes the idea of same-gendered love. Though Lil Nas X cites *Symposium*’s progressive idea of love in his song, Plato himself had very conservative ideas when it came to music. In both *Laws* and *Republic*, Plato describes a new style of music developed in the fifth century BCE that modern scholars call “New Music.” Musical νόμοι were abandoned by these New Musicians, who were labeled by critics (including Plato himself) as “possessed by pleasure,” “soft and loose,” “effeminate,” “womanish,” and even causing “a sexual itch to enter into [their] very fundament” (Pl. *Laws* 3.700d; Ar. *PCG* fr. 178; *TrGF* 39 test. 11; Ar. *Thesm.* 131, 133). Such oversexualizing and queering rhetoric was not ignored but rather embraced by New Musicians, who chose to wear “effeminate” clothing and to sing in modes described as “orgiastic,” “emotional,” and “feminine” by ancient music critics. Similarly, in his music video for “Call Me By Your Name,” Lil Nas X embraces the oversexualization of his queer body by incorporating overtly sexual and anti-Christian imagery. The proposed paper will analyze the conservative backlash against Lil Nas X’s music video while highlighting just how accurately Plato’s rhetoric around New Music foreshadowed the modern homophobic reaction to artists breaking from traditional ideas of gender and sexuality.