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# Milton's Adam as a Lover

Dudley R. Hutcherson

[*Editor's Note: The following article was written by Dean Hutcherson shortly before his death in September, 1960. It was read at the meeting of the South Central Modern Language Association in Oklahoma City, November 11, 1960. Although Dean Hutcherson intended to make certain revisions in his paper before it was published, the article is now printed substantially as he left it.*]

The conduct of Milton's Adam as a lover and husband can well serve—except during the few scenes when the enormity of his sin and his masculine inclination to dramatize excessively his agony overcame him—as a model to his sons. The present intention is to consider the sources of Adam's competence in these roles. Did the author of *Paradise Lost* find in the Adams of his predecessors the knowledge and the techniques that his first of men utilizes attractively and effectively? Were these qualities derived from Milton's reading or from his imagination? Or did the poet draw upon his own experience? Much has been made of Adam's statements about women in *Paradise Lost* as reflecting the bitter wisdom that Milton had acquired through the years. Does Adam also demonstrate that his creator had learned well other and more pleasant pages from the textbook of marital life?

The Adam whom Milton first introduces to us—and to Satan, who looks on with burning envy—is Adam, the lover. He is also an Adam who requires, as the laws of Milton's universe dictate, "subjection" from his mate, but Eve already has learned that he prefers that this obedience be rendered with "sweet reluctant amorous delay." Hand in hand Adam and Eve stroll through the Garden, "the loveliest pair," the poet tells us and with apparently his chief interest in only one

aspect of their lives, "that ever since in love's embraces met." That frequently throughout the poem Adam and Eve hold hands or touch each other with meaningful gestures, has been noted by Svendsen.<sup>1</sup> In no version of the story other than Milton's does the writer make use of these appealing and human devices. Adam and Eve walk past their unseen observer and seat themselves "on the soft downy bank damasked with flowers." While they enjoy their "supper-fruits," there is not wanting, the poet tells us, "youthful dalliance as beseems/Fair couple linked in happy nuptial league,/Alone as they." Although in a perfect state the enjoyment must have been mutual, it is to be supposed that it was initiated and directed by Adam, whose "absolute rule" over his lovely companion was stressed in the first lines of the description of the noble pair.

"Sole partner and sole part of all these joys/Dearer thyself than all," Adam begins the first words to Eve to which we are privy, and completes the frame of the somewhat stern reminder of God's prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge with the declaration that even if it were toilsome to care for the plants and flowers of Paradise "yet with thee [it] were sweet." Eve's response reminds him of their first meeting, and concludes with a submissive half-embrace. Milton's Adam is not at loss for a moment, as his creator may have been with Mary Powell a quarter of a century earlier. Smiling with "superior love," he presses Eve's lips "with kisses pure," and Satan turns away in envy and jealousy.

In only a few of the many other versions of the story of Paradise do the authors present details of Adam's conduct when he and Eve make their first appearance. The most elaborate account is probably in Du Bartas, which Milton knew in Joshua Sylvester's translation, in which Adam "ravisht" by "the rare beauties of his new-come Half," begins "kissing her kindly" while he extols her many virtues.<sup>2</sup> In *Adamus Exul* of Hugo Grotius, Adam reminiscing with Eve about her creation, recalls that "when I saw thee, sweet amazement seized upon/My still inactive limbs; a new flame melted me/With all the

fires of love," but there is no further statement of Adam's reactions.<sup>3</sup> Salandra's Adam is even more complimentary, if possible—certainly he is more profuse—than Milton's in the tributes to his mate, but he confines himself to talk.<sup>4</sup> Apollyon in his report to Beelzebub in Vondel's *Lucifer, Truerspel* describes how Adam "embraced his bride, and she her man."<sup>5</sup> In the many other accounts, though, no attention is given in the introduction of Adam and Eve to their response to each other.

In the nuptial scene in *Paradise Lost* Adam conducts himself not with timid uncertainty but with an assurance and a self-confident competence that usually are the products of much experience. It is true, as stated in the legends of the Jews<sup>6</sup> and elsewhere, and as C. S. Lewis emphasized strongly,<sup>7</sup> that Adam was supposedly created fully possessed of all the knowledge and the abilities that he needed. If it is granted that this maturity was assigned to him by tradition, it is still to be determined whether the specific manifestations of it that appear in *Paradise Lost* come from the earlier Adams or from Milton. Many of the other accounts—Avidus,<sup>8</sup> Du Bartas,<sup>9</sup> Grotius,<sup>10</sup> the legends of the Jews,<sup>11</sup> Pareus,<sup>12</sup> and Beaumont<sup>13</sup> among them—mention or describe the marriage scene, but in no other version is there an Adam who possesses the sophistication and the ease of Milton's first of men.

That Milton's Adam had never existed in the preceding accounts is impressively apparent when Adam awakens at the side of Eve. It is difficult to believe that Adam's masterly conduct in these charming moments could have derived its rightness from anything but Milton's many years with women. Although genius can never be denied the privilege of vicarious achievement, it would be a naive reader indeed who could be persuaded that the skill displayed by Adam in this scene had its source in the author's reading and in his imagination.

On his side, leaning half-raised, Adam bends over the sleeping Eve, admiring her beauty and feeling his great love for her. Before he begins to speak, his hand reaches out to touch her softly, another

instance of Milton's continual use of the hand as a medium and a symbol of their love. "Awake," Adam whispers, "My fairest, my espoused, my latest found/Heaven's last best gift, my ever new delight." Then follows the scene of Eve's frightened awakening, of her clinging to Adam while she pours out the story of her dream (the dream, incidentally, an addition by Milton), and of Adam's explanation of the dream.

Then comes what is perhaps Milton's master stroke in his highly successful delineation of Adam in the role of lover. Eve, cheered by her husband's psychological analysis of the dream, plays perfectly the woman's part, summoning two gentle tears in each eye. The first pair Eve wipes away with her hair. Adam abandons immediately his role as a scientist and is the lover again. He leans down and kisses away the other two tears. This touch is from the hand—or more exactly, the lips—of an expert. No precedent for it is to be found in all of the other pages about Adam and Eve.

Eve in *Paradise Lost* leaves no doubt of her high opinion of her husband's skill in love. While Raphael explains the universe to Adam, Eve goes out to tend her flowers, not that she is incapable of understanding the Seraph's discourse, but she prefers to have Adam repeat it to her—and also she is aware, apparently by instinct, of how much man is flattered by woman's seeming regard for his knowledge. Furthermore, Milton adds, Eve knows that Adam "would intermix/Graceful digressions, and solve high dispute/With conjugal caresses; from his lips/Not words alone pleased her." Thus the poet seems to take the occasion to remind us of Adam's attractive competence as a consort, although it may be suggested that Milton's fascination with Eve's charm, or his understanding of her frivolity is also involved.

The delightful colloquy between God and Adam, as reported by the latter to Raphael, about God's providing Adam with a mate is evidence that Milton wanted the importance of a mate to be on Adam's mind from the beginning. It is significant also, in determining in what aspects of life Milton was interested, that in no other

version of the Adam and Eve story does a dialogue take place between God and Adam about a mate similar to the discussion in *Paradise Lost*. This charming exchange apparently is entirely John Milton's invention.

Adam's description to Raphael of his infatuation with Eve and of his first hours with her reveals his imprisonment to her glorious loveliness and grace, and also that he is entirely sure of himself in his relations with his wife. Raleigh may be correct, though, in his contention that Adam's and Milton's technique is faulty in that the beautiful eulogy "When I approach her loveliness" should have been addressed to Eve herself and not to Raphael.<sup>14</sup>

Is this beautiful and attractive creature an older poet's dream of what Mary Powell should have been, and, more to our present inquiry, is this the sophisticated self-assurance which Milton wishes that he could recall from his days with Mary, or perhaps which he does remember from his life with the two other wives? Raphael's sharp reproof is accepted by Adam, but this creator never allows the Angel to subdue completely his earthly host. In the end Adam asks the question about heavenly love that flusters Raphael. In Milton's Great Scheme, which he inherited, Adam must pay soon for his subjection to Eve, and there is no intention here to deny what Milton considered the greater concern. It is of interest, though, that Adam and his curiosity about love-making in Heaven almost steal the scene.

That the Adam of *Paradise Lost* is wisely skillful in more than one aspect of his relations with Eve appears in the "mild answer" that he returns to her suggestion that they work apart, in the "healing words" that he continues to offer, and in the epithet with which he attempts to win the discussion. "Daughter of God and Man, immortal Eve." He does let himself become somewhat annoyed when he gets nowhere with his efforts, but not even the perfect man can be expected to keep his poise forever in the face of a woman's persistence. Adam has been holding Eve's hand hopefully during the

debate, another of the several instances of Milton's effective use of this very human gesture.

While Eve is away from him with Satan, Adam weaves "of choicest flowers a garland to adorn/Her tresses," a gesture that seems at first additional evidence of Adam's knowingness as a lover. It might be argued, however, that although the Milton-Adam type is gentle, he is not a weaver of flowers, but perhaps we are too far away from the pastoral school to appreciate Milton's point of view.

Adam's speeches after Eve tells him of her act and when he decides to eat the fruit are the eloquent declarations of a hopeless prisoner to a woman's charm—great speeches for a great lover if the story were rewritten as a love story. These speeches contribute nothing, though, to the present inquiry. They are highly effective rhetorical poetry, but they are not reflections of practical experience. On the other hand, it is perhaps of significance to this study that the detailed account of how Adam and Eve exhaust themselves in their lust is to be found only in Milton. Bar Cepha, whose *De Paradiso* was available to Milton in Masius' Latin translation, shares with the English poet the emphasis on this episode, but not the effective description.<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis comments that Adam's words to Eve at the beginning of this scene of unrestrained physical dissipation strike exactly the right note in terms of Adam's circumstances and his attitude.<sup>16</sup>

Adam's behavior during the "fruitless hours" of "mutual accusation" after he and Eve awaken from the exhaustion that follows their dissipation and during the Son's judgment is the reverse side of the coin, the display of the male who discovers that his self-assured competence has helped to betray him into neglecting the primary values. His misery during the night as he suffers dramatically on the cold ground of the Garden is, Don Cameron Allen suggests, "the Christian echo to the sleepless nights and amorous complaints of the 'starved lover' of the Petrarchian tradition."<sup>17</sup> Adam in his

great agony does not think of his way with Eve. There are now more important concerns. Adam lies alone.

Whatever his previous display of bad temper and his histrionic suffering, once Adam permits himself to be moved by Eve's despair and humility, he is again the knowing husband, but now, as the occasion requires, also the understanding, gentle, affectionate partner. Whether Eve's prostration at Adam's feet had its origin in Milton's recollection of Mary Powell's return to him, the last scenes between the parents of the human race show a man of experience in domestic life. And then, as the poem moves toward its close, there is one last flash of the old Adam, the delight and enthusiasm he exhibits when Michael presents to him the vision of amorous activities among Adam's descendants. Immediately Milton, with an eye now only to the fundamental issue, has the Angel sternly reprove Adam. The reader has not forgotten, however, the Adam of much better days.

In no other account is there any attempt to establish for Adam the skill as a lover and the competence in his relations with Eve that are depicted effectively by Milton in the scenes that have just been reviewed. Nothing of this kind is to be found, for example, in Avitus, Beaumont, Du Bartas, the Caedmonian story, the English dramatic cycles. Some of the commentators in the middle ages argue the problem of whether there were physical relations before the Fall.<sup>18</sup> Other medieval expositors forego any possibility of elaborating on the life of Adam and Eve by insisting that there was only a very short time between the Creation and the Fall.<sup>19</sup> In Andreini's *L'Adamo*, Adam speaks fluently of his love for Eve,<sup>20</sup> and in the *Adamo Caduto* of Salandra, Adam and Eve discuss love;<sup>21</sup> but in neither work are the qualities of Milton's Adam anticipated. The *Adamus Exul* of Grotius contains some talk, mainly on the part of Eve, of their nuptial love, but nothing more.<sup>22</sup>

The very young Milton expressed in Latin elegies I and VII his interest in girls and in Elegy V his sensual enthusiasm for love in its most physical aspects; both expressions were conventional, but



also both were apparently personal. True, he provided an epilogue to the Latin elegies in which he recanted, but it is often pointed out that a mature man really ashamed of his love poems and having lost interest in what they concerned behaved in a peculiar fashion in publishing the same poems twenty years after his renunciation. The sonnets in Italian are in part traditional love poems, but they also express the young poet's own interest in an attractive girl. Love is the subject of the first English sonnet. If *Comus* represents the attitude of the man who wrote it, as it is assumed that it does, Milton by his twenty-sixth year had determined upon at least a sparse temperance, and probably even looked upon celibacy as an ideal state.

Eight years after the production of *Comus*, Milton in the *Smectymnyus* tract, writing in defense of his past life, recalls how he had learned from the stories of chivalry "what a noble vertue chastity must be." He states emphatically, however, that he does not regard marriage as an unchastity. In a very few months, though, Milton in the famous lines in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* takes another look at life in the chilling light of day, or more exactly of one of the gray mornings after his child-bride had left him.

And lastly, is it not strange [he inquires] though that many who have spent their youth chastly, are in some things not so quick-sighted, while they haste too eagerly to light the nuptial torch; nor is it therefore that for a modest error a man should forfeit so great a happiness, and no charitable means to release him. Since they who have liv'd most loosely, by reason of their bold accustoming, prove most successfull in their matches, because their wild affections, unsettling at will, have been as so many divorces to teach them experience.<sup>23</sup>

Milton's words must not be misread to support a license in personal conduct that he never at any time advocated or defended. What is found in this passage that is of interest here is that Milton, well

past thirty, apparently had been forced suddenly to a mature appreciation of the value of experience in certain aspects of life. Is it too much to assume that in the years that followed he paid careful heed to the lesson he had learned so painfully, and that he slowly acquired in his three marriages the knowledge that he considered of high value?

The question of what, if anything, Milton's own experience, acquired as is that of many men after he had learned the painful cost of inexperience, contributed to Adam's skill in love cannot be separated, of course, from the problem of Milton's share in Adam's other actions and statements. It is apparently an error to read into Adam's conduct and expressions too much that represents his creator's personal life, just as it is a mistake to hold that Milton in no instance permits Adam to reflect the poet's own feelings or experience. The difficulty obviously is to determine what Adam derives from Milton and what he doesn't. Grierson states that no one was ever, in one way, more susceptible to experience than Milton.<sup>24</sup> Raleigh declares that Milton "was extraordinarily susceptible to the attractions of feminine beauty and grace. Adam's confessions are his own . . ."<sup>25</sup> Saurat, whose views are sometimes subject to question, speaks of "Milton's fundamentally sensual nature on the one side, and his pride of intellect, on the other, which come naturally to this compromise: sensual love is praiseworthy and sacred when it is made legitimate by the approval of reason."<sup>26</sup> Milton was not subject to the qualities that ruin most men, Tillyard thinks; "he has no part in their levity and their terror of standing alone . . . . For him personally sex was the great pitfall. And so he cannot refrain from grafting sex onto the structure of the fall."<sup>27</sup> And when Adam breaks out in his bitter prediction of the ills that women bring to men, it is, Tillyard states, "Milton's own voice, unable through the urgency of personal experience to keep silent."<sup>28</sup> Not to be overlooked, though, is McColley's reminder that although Milton's personal experience with Mary Powell may perhaps at least have lent vigor to

Adam's statements, the ideas that Milton expressed were those usually found in Christian discussions of marriage.<sup>29</sup>

In no other version of the story of Paradise, or in all other treatments combined, does an Adam participate who even approaches the effectiveness of Milton's Adam in love. It must be taken into account, of course, that the man who gave to Adam these talents might have learned them from his reading. For example, Douglas Bush suggests that Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit behaved somewhat in the manner of Paris and Helen or of Zeus and Hera when the goddess assumed the girdle of Aphrodite.<sup>30</sup> The similarity of Adam's night of agony to that of a Petrarchian lover already has been mentioned. Beyond two or three possible parallels, however, it is very difficult to find literary sources for this part of Adam's life. Nor can Milton's imagination be discounted, but again we have no evidence. Milton did declare shortly after his child-bride had left him that in some ways it was to a man's advantage to have had experience with women. That experience the poet must have gained, because Mary returned, and then there was briefly Katherine, and, after her, Elizabeth, and there is no record that he did not live with them very successfully and very happily, although he must have been as sharply aware at times of their human failings as they were of his. May we not be permitted then to wonder whether what the Adam of *Paradise Lost* knew about women and love, and which none of the other Adams knew, in the main had not been learned through the years by John Milton?

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kester Svendsen, *Milton and Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 111-112.

<sup>2</sup>Guillaume Du Bartas, *La Sepmaine* (1578), quoted from Watson Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Hugo Grotius, *Adamus Exul* (1601), quoted from Kirkconnell *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 139.

<sup>4</sup>Serafino della Salandra, *Adamo Caduto* (1647), in Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, pp. 303-304.

<sup>5</sup>Joost van den Vondel, *Lucifer Treurspel* (1654), quoted from Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 366.

<sup>6</sup>Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938), I, 59.

<sup>7</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 112-114.

<sup>8</sup>Avitus, *Poematum de Mosaicae Gestis, Libri Quinque*, in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, LIX, 328.

<sup>9</sup>Du Bartas, *La Sepmaine*, quoted from Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup>Grotius, *Adamus Exul*, in Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 139.

<sup>11</sup>Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 68.

<sup>12</sup>See Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), p. 88.

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Beaumont, *Psyche, or Love's Mystery* (Cambridge, 1702), p. 83.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Raleigh, *Milton* (London: Edward Arnold, 1900), pp. 143-144.

<sup>15</sup>See Grant McColley, *Paradise Lost* (Chicago: Packard and Company, 1940), p. 178.

<sup>16</sup>Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup>Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1954), p. 78.

<sup>18</sup>See Williams, *The Common Expositor*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>20</sup>Giambattista Andreini, *L'Adamo* (1613), in Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, pp. 241, 253, 255-256.

<sup>21</sup>Salandra, *Adamo Caduto*, in Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 327.

<sup>22</sup>Grotius, *Adamus Exul*, in Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, p. 203.

<sup>23</sup>*The Works of John Milton* (21 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-1938), III, 394-395.

<sup>24</sup>H. J. C. Grierson, *Cross Currents in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 237.

<sup>25</sup>Raleigh, *Milton*, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup>Dennis Saurat, *Milton, Man and Thinker* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1944), pp. 48-49.

<sup>27</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, *Milton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), p. 265.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>McColley, *Paradise Lost*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup>Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (Minneapolis, Minn.: The University of Minnesota Press, 1932), p. 278.