



Undergraduate Review

Volume 5

Article 30

2009

The Fidelity of the Fruit: A Psychology of Adam's Fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Bradford Vezina

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vezina, Bradford (2009). The Fidelity of the Fruit: A Psychology of Adam's Fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 150-154.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/30

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2009 Bradford Vezina

The Fidelity of the Fruit: A Psychology of Adam's Fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

BRADFORD VEZINA

From his slack hand the Garland wreath'd for Eve
Down dropp'd, and all the faded Roses shed:
Speechless he stood and pale. (9.892-94)

Brad is a first year law student at Suffolk University Law School. He wrote this piece in Professor Chaplin's Milton course in the spring of 2008.

The passage above provides an apt image, with all its symbolic overtones, of Adam's reaction to Eve's mortal transgression—that is, her eating from the Forbidden Tree. The circular nature of the garland signifies perfection and permanence; the roses convey the delicacy, vitality, and bloom of life. The garland not only represents the perfection of a paradisaical world, but the union between Adam and Eve. But Eve's careless and wanton act shatters such a union. This leaves Adam with a choice: to eat the fruit thereby upholding his bond with and love for Eve (an act in defiance of God), or to walk away and shoulder the pangs of a broken heart and the prospect of a solitary future. He chooses the former. Many critics have argued—and will no doubt continue to argue—that slavish and blind passion prompted Adam to eat from the Tree. But this is not the case. Adam acts out of love. He sacrifices himself out of love, a sacrifice that parallels that of the Son (i.e. Jesus) in Book III of the epic.

The charge against Adam is almost unanimous: he acts out of uxoriousness and idolatry. Such a charge invokes the medieval notion of lady worship shown in the romances of Chrétien. Take Erec and Enide as an example. After winning Enide's hand in marriage, Erec grows complacent and neglects his duties as a knight. He relegates himself to his room and satisfies his desire for his lady. He worships her above all things, even God. In light of this medieval tradition, it is understandable—if not expected—that critics would rebuke Adam for falling into similar excessive fondness for Eve. C. S. Lewis bluntly states: "Adam fell by uxoriousness" (454). Another critic, Northrop Frye, in his essay "Children of God and Nature," claims that "Milton places the supremacy of Eve over God at the central point of the fall itself" (63). While Lewis claims that Adam's fault lies in his uxoriousness, Frye adds to this a charge of idolatry.

The argument that Adam fell because of uxoriousness or idolatry, however, depends on a few assumptions: first, that Adam was motivated by lust and passion (in accordance with the medieval convention); and, second, that, in eating from the Forbidden Tree, Adam sought to supplant the image of God with that of Eve. Both assumptions prove tenuous. It is particularly important to consider the nature and dynamic of Adam and Eve's relationship: it's primarily contemplative, not appetitive. Here we turn to Book VIII.

Even though Adam is given dominion over the earth and all its inhabiting animals, he is struck by a certain disparity. He notices that each animal has its own corresponding partner. Sensing his solitary state, Adam questions God's divine framework:

Among unequals what society
Can sort, what harmony or true delight?
Which must be mutual, in proportion due
Giv'n and received; but in disparity (8.383-86)

Adam seeks a partner that compliments his own nature. Animals cannot assume such a role because they lack that which is essential to human beings: a rational faculty. Adam seeks a partner who can actualize his fullest potential as a rational being. Here Milton situates Adam and Eve's relationship on an intellectual basis, where both can share in each other's thoughts and empirical discoveries. Milton stresses that Adam and Eve share a contemplative bond, not a hedonistic one.

This emphasis on a contemplative union is consistent with Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. Throughout the work, Milton attacks various biblical interpretations that condemn divorce as a sin against God. Milton takes a radical position on the issue, arguing that divorce is necessary to maintain the integrity of marriage itself. He was keenly aware that many marriages, once a symbol of happiness and spiritual unification, are likely to turn into self-induced and inescapable tyrannies. In the process of building his argument, Milton explains the purpose and goals of a good marriage:

God in the first ordaining of marriage taught us to what end he did it, in words expressly implying that apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation till afterwards, as being but a secondary end in dignity, though not in necessity. (703)

Given this marital sketch, the parallels of Adam and Eve's relationship are quite obvious. Adam seeks the creation of Eve to remedy his state of solitude and to provide that "cheerful conversation of man with woman." Milton goes so far as to minimize the importance of sexuality and physical desire as that which is necessary for procreation, but on a baser level than the intellect. Even though Adam and Eve do partake in sexual desire (which is considered pure and innocent in a prelapsarian world), Milton claims that their relationship is primarily based on the intellect.

Indeed, Adam and Eve's relationship often assumes a Neo-Platonic element. Milton often makes reference to the graces

emanated from Eve. On such graces, Adam describes: "Grace was in all her eyes, Heav'n in her Eye / In every gesture dignity and love. / I overjoyed could not forbear aloud" (8.488-90). Here Milton infuses Eve with similar kind of love found in Plato's Symposium. According to this tradition, true love is found through the contemplation of the Form of Beauty, which is conveyed by a lover. True love, accordingly, is the transcendence of the physical via the contemplation of the Form of Beauty. When Adam gazes at Eve, he is struck by her transcendent beauty, a beauty that allows him to glimpse the divine. Purvis E. Boyette, tracing these Neo-Platonic graces in Milton's work, points out that "the Graces [of Eve] were for the Neoplatonists the inclusive symbol of love" ("Milton's Eve and the Neoplatonic Graces" 342). This allows for a couple of inferences to be made: first, that Milton wishes to posture Adam and Eve's marriage as being contemplative and divine in essence; and second, that their love is a vehicle of the divine essence (i.e. an emanation of the divine).

Therefore, in light of these considerations, the critic who argues that Adam acted under uxoriousness or idolatry (or both) must shoulder the burden of proof. Frye buttresses his argument by pointing to one particular passage spoken by Adam: "All higher knowledge in [Eve's] presence falls / Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her / Loses discount'nanc't, and like folly shows" (8.551-53). This passage captures Adam's first brush with passion. He tells of the debasing power of lust. Afterwards, Raphael rebuffs Adam's folly and tells him to direct his gaze towards the heavens away from the physical realm. While this passage may hint at the fact that Adam's relationship with Eve is not impervious to passionate impulses, it certainly does not warrant the conclusion that Adam *acted* out of passion and weakness when eating from the Forbidden Tree. Such a claim is a gross *non-sequitur*. Even so, the passage still forces a closer reading of the text.

When Adam stumbles upon Eve in the garden, he finds her standing before the Forbidden Tree, a partially eaten fruit in her hand and a squirm of guilt in her eyes. Adam drops the garland. He realizes that life can no longer continue as it did. He questions: "How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost, / Defac't, deflow'r'd, and now to Death devote?" (9.900-01) Adam seems to not only question divine justice, in light of Eve's inexplicable act, but also realizes that he too is lost: "And mee with thee hath ruined" (9.906). The critics—such as Lewis and Frye—maintain that Adam is overcome by his blind and passion for Eve. But such a position is not supported by the text itself. When Adam resolves to incur the same plight as Eve, he makes no appeal to pity or passion: "How can I live without thee, how forgo / Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join'd, / To live again in these wild Woods forlorn?" (9.908-10)

These lines underscore the unemotional resolve of Adam. Passion or lust does not cloud his judgment. Instead, Adam *rationaly* appeals to that which constitutes a good marriage. He first laments an intellectual loss—"Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join'd"—and a chasm between the spiritual and physical union between the two. Adam then mourns the possibility of solitude, the state in which he was first created. Many readers are apt to label such a response as uxoriousness. But this is to mistake Adam's action with its real motive: love. We notice that Adam often refers to a physical and spiritual bond between himself and Eve: "The Bond of Nature draw me to my own, / My own in thee, for what thou art is mine" and "I feel the Link of Nature draw me" (9.956-57, 914). Here Adam grounds his motive in his natural and spiritual bond with Eve. Eve is of Adam's own flesh and of the same mind. In turning away from Eve, Adam must turn away from himself. Physical lust or passion has little to do with Adam's decision to eat from the Forbidden Tree.

There is a weakness, however, in any argument that wishes to assign love as Adam's motive in the fall. This involves the nature of love in a theological framework: namely, how can love produce sin. In other words, how can something pure and good result in something vile and base? Saint Augustine argues that the essence of love is found in God. Sin is the privation of God. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes: "So the soul commits fornication when she turns away from you and tries to find outside you things which, unless she returns to you, cannot be found in their true and pure state" (2.6). Augustine maintains that love cannot produce that which contradicts God. When Adam bites from the fruit, an act of love and mercy, it is an act that removes him from God. In an Augustinian framework, Adam could not have acted out of love since such an act would not have resulted in the privation of goodness; a true act of love would have turned Adam *towards* God. Therefore, when we assign love as Adam's motive, we are confronted with some difficult questions: Can an act of love produce a consequence contrary to God (since love is God)? Does the nature of an action bear on the motive of the action?

There is a way to parry this objection; it requires that we acknowledge Milton's dichotomy of love. Milton divides love into two realms: the spiritual and the physical. Many readers may question this division, claiming that such physical love cannot exist in a prelapsarian world. But such a claim overlooks the ontological disunity created by Eve's fall. When Adam stumbles on Eve in the garden, she has already fallen. She no longer shoots forth her rays of grace. She has been corrupted and debased; she has descended into the physical realm. But Adam remains unfallen. Adam still maintains his native element; and although Eve lacks her spiritual essence—

her divinity—she still maintains that physical "Link of Nature" with Adam (9.914). Adam and Eve still maintain their oneness of flesh. The salvation of their union, of their marriage, depends on Adam's willingness to incur sin. Thus Adam's voluntary fall is the greatest proclamation of love (albeit one based on the physical).

Let us consider the next charge before us: idolatry. Any argument to the effect that Adam acted under idolatry (i.e. that he worshipped Eve instead of God) stands on a brittle foundation. After the fall, God chastises Adam: "Was shee they God, that her thou didst obey" (10.145). Milton seems to have caught himself in a briar patch. Idolatry implies the supplanting of God. Eve commits this heresy. After biting from the fruit, she then prostrates herself before the Forbidden Tree and worships it. Here she pledges allegiance to an inferior substitute; she dismisses the power of God. As Lewis caustically remarks: she "worships a vegetable" (454). Adam does no such thing. In fact, his complicity in the fall is quite interesting because he understands the dire consequences. He realizes that, in eating from the Forbidden Tree, he will subject himself to whatever punishment God deems fit. Such rationalization is an affirmation of the supremacy of God. He does not seek to replace God, as both Eve and Satan do, but rather he simply disobeys Him.

Milton portrays Adam's fall as a noble sacrifice of love. Elliott A. White, in his essay "Adam's Motive," explains that Milton intended to present Adam as a noble hero who acted out of love and whose only error was "letting his feelings overmaster him to the point of making him do that sin which God had expressly forbidden" (230). In this context of love, there is a certain necessity in Adam's fall. When Adam resolves to join Eve in her transgression, Eve states: "This happy trial of Thy Love, which else / So eminently never had been known" (9.975-76). These lines are particularly important. Here Milton suggests that a necessary condition of love is a sacrifice or trial. Love must be tested and found legitimate through voluntary sacrifice. Thus, Adam's sacrifice consummates his love for Eve. While Adam is often viewed as the transgressor of God, we can also view him in another light: a heroic martyr.

Indeed, Adam's sacrifice mirrors the Son's in Book III. After foretelling the fall of Adam and Eve, God explains that humanity can be redeemed but only at the cost of another's sacrifice. A debt must be paid. Addressing the heavenly angels, God seeks a willing candidate: "Say heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love, / Which of ye will be mortal to redeem / Mans mortal crime, and just th' unjust save, / Dwells in all Heaven so dear?" (3.212-16) While the rest of the angels stand mute, the Son volunteers:

Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life
 I offer, on mee, let thine anger fall;
 Account mee man; I for his sake will leave
 Thy bosom, and his glory next to thee
 Freely put off, and for him lastly die
 Well pleas'd on me let Death wretch all his rage.
 (3.236-41)

The Son incurs the sin of man, thereby providing a model of redemption and a means of salvation. The nature of such a sacrifice is particularly important. The Son's voluntary acceptance of such a sacrifice speaks to a motive of love and mercy for humanity. As God in the above passage indicates, such an act requires an enormous reserve of love. Moreover, this act of love entails an ontological descent—"I for his sake will leave / Thy bosom"—where the Son will assume corporeal existence.

In light of this, Adam's fall acquires a more heroic posture due to its parallels with the Son's sacrifice. For instance, we notice that both the Son and Adam proclaim their love through sacrifice. Each accepts that their act will result in an ontological descent: humanity for the Son, mortality for Adam. Their actions are voluntary. Unlike Eve who was beguiled by Satan (which does not make her any less culpable) Adam approaches his fall aware of what will befall him if he chooses to eat from the tree. In spite of such clarity of vision, Adam chooses to sacrifice his state of purity for the prospect of companionship and love. One passage in particular, spoken by Eve to Adam, captures the image of Adam as a heroic martyr, that is, as a Jesus figure:

Remarkably so late of thy so true,
 So faithful Love, unequal'd; but I feel
 Far otherwise th' event, not Death, but Life
 Augmented, op'n'd Eyes, new Hopes, new Joys,
 Taste so Divine, that what of sweet before
 Hath toucht my sense (9.982-87)

Here Eve explains that Adam's resolution to eat the fruit provides her a certain solace amidst her fallen state. She no longer thinks on death, but on the prospect of a future. Adam becomes symbolic in many ways. Not unlike the Son, Adam represents that lost paradise in which Eve—and humanity in general—once flourished. Adam is a vestige of paradise and happiness that Eve now seeks. Whereas the Son stands as the sole redeemer of humanity, Adam stands as the sole redeemer of Eve. His sacrifice replaces despair with hope and sadness with joy. In essence, Adam's fall ensures a happier future for Eve.

Indeed, Adam's fall is a cause for celebration in the context of Christian history. Christian history is linear in nature, where the fall and crucifixion are but singular moments—crucial moments nevertheless—with a grander scheme as its end: namely, the second coming of Jesus and the founding of the City of God. There is a proleptic nature to Christian events. The fall of Adam, while often seen as a glaring failure in humanity, allows for the unfolding of time according to Christian Doctrine. In "On the Mourning of Christ's Nativity," Milton celebrates the procession of time and the coming of future. The birth of Christ reinforces the concept of order and purpose in a divinely created world. This is suggested by the many references to the music of the spheres (bk. 8). The sublunary world and celestial spheres come into alignment and spin in harmony, providing a divine melody of hope and peace. The same anticipation and progression of history is found in Adam's fall. It marks an initiation of the many events to come—the administering of grace, the coming of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the ascension to the City of God. Adam's fall is both a pause for despair and a cause for hope.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* shows Adam as someone who sacrifices himself in the name of love. He is a heroic martyr. He does not, as many critics would like us to believe, fall by uxoriousness. As the text clearly indicates, Adam and Eve share a union that is founded on contemplation and companionship. Both are physical and spiritual composites of each other. In his sacrifice, Adam not only affirms the supremacy of God, but the legitimacy of a physical love that is just as real and enthralling as spiritual love. Adam does not fall by idolatry either: such a claim depends on evidence that supports the contention that Adam dismisses or supplants God—evidence that is not found within the epic. Adam reacted to Eve's folly as any husband would (or should): with love and compassion and mercy. His error does not lie as much in his motive as it does in his disobedience. His love may have misguided him, but it remains a point of debate whether his love is any less pure because of it.

Works Cited.

- Boyette, Purvis E. "Milton's Eve and the Neoplatonic Graces." *Renaissance Quarterly*. Vol. 20 No 3. (1967). 341-345.
- Chretien De Troyes. *Erec and Enide. Authorian Romances*. Trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Frye, Northrop. "Children of God and Nature." *The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics*. Canada, Toronto Press, 1965.
- Lewis, C. S. "The Fall." *Paradise Lost: Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gordon Teskey. New York, Norton, 2005.

Milton, John. *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis, Hackett, 2003. 696-715.

Milton, John. "On the Mourning of Christ's Nativity." *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis, Hackett, 2003. 42-50.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost. Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis, Hackett, 2003. 173-469.

Plato. Symposium. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997. 457-505.

Saint Augustine. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Ed. Rex Warner. New York, Signet Classic, 2001.

White, Elliott A. "Adam's Motive." *Modern Language Notes*. Vol. 30 No. 7. (1915). 229-231.