



Paradise Lost: Milton's "Great Divorce"

By Rebecca Miriam Block

"Male" and "female" are intimately united in creation, the two sexes composing "man". Any misunderstanding about the relationship between male and female necessarily results in a misconception of the nature of man. Such fallacy concerning man is illustrated by John Milton's famous work, *Paradise Lost*. Milton's representation of Eve as a lesser being than Adam takes form out of a disillusioned idea of marriage as something "odious to the freedom and dignity of man."¹ Claiming that Milton thinks women inferior is difficult to prove, however, because Milton's theology is essentially nominalist—he uses orthodoxy to protect himself from criticism and, simultaneously uses it to appeal to ideas that are necessarily unorthodox. As a result, well-meaning, intelligent people are able to see the truth in Milton's illustration of Eve, while the evil of representing woman as a substandard being is at the same time able to take root subtly. This nominalist theology makes it necessary to scrutinize as a whole the facets in Milton's life which effect the anti-feminine error in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's negative attitude towards marriage dates from his early life. He was afraid of women, a fact attested to by the ridicule of his own friends. It took Milton well into his thirties to marry, and when he finally did, his wife was only seventeen, and was pressured to marry Milton because her family was in debt to him. The girl, Mary Powell, left Milton, an act for which he never forgave her, even after her return. Hilaire Belloc, in his book on Milton, points out that after Mary ran away,

Milton's change of character was set:

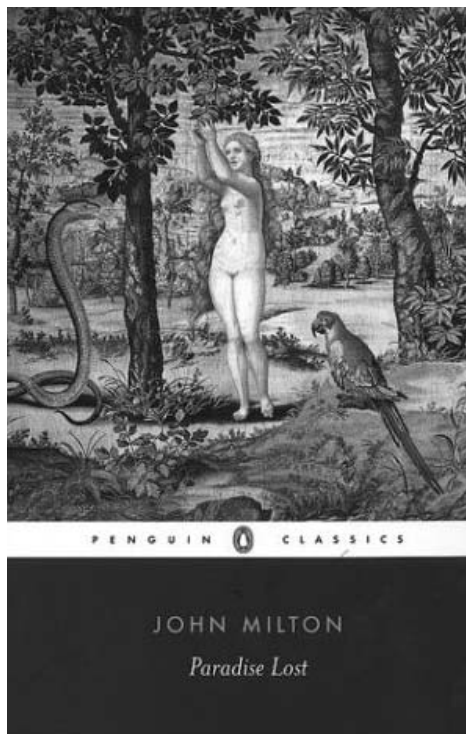
he was a man burning with grievance. It never left him. It colored all he did. His mind turned upon it as upon a central pivot. It was a grievance of a special kind; not against an individual, nor even against the scheme of things,

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but rather a grievance against the unexpected bitterness of the world as revealed through the atrocious nature of woman, in the first place; but in the second place and in a larger manner in the fact that he—John Milton—had actually suffered, had been made a victim and (though he would never admit it) a laughingstock. From that winter of 1642–43 he is to be found occupied on the theme that woman brings evil into the lives of men, that woman is inferior, that woman is treasonable.²

Unfortunately, Milton was unable to stop his growing quarrel with woman. He attacked the Godly institution of marriage itself, publicly promoting divorce with numerous pamphlets and privately pleading for polygamy.³ His case for divorce was mainly that marriage is only valid when completely perfect, and that marriage could not be a sacrament if it brought humiliation or misery.⁴

Despite his anger toward women, Milton could not help but see some good in woman's nature, which he presents stunningly in *Paradise Lost*. Eve is beautiful beyond compare. She is so incredible that she falls in love with her own reflection, preferring it to Adam: "Yet methought less fair, / Less winning loft, less amiably mild, / Than that smooth watery image" (4. 478–80). Although Eve is lovely, her knowledge of her own beauty makes her susceptible to pride, "the woman, opportune to all attempts" (9.490), a weakness that the devil takes advantage of during her fall. Nevertheless, there is some redemptive value in Eve's beauty, in that by her beauty



Adam claims to receive “access in every virtue” (9.310). Grace is so present in Eve that the devil himself is affected by it:

Such pleasure took the Serpent to
 behold . . . her every air
Of gesture, or least action, overawed
His malice, and with rapine sweet
 bereaved
His fierceness of the fierce intent it
 brought:
That space the Evil-one abstracted
 stood
From his own evil, and for the time
 remained
Stupidly good (9.455, 459–65).

The devil is struck by her utter beauty so that, for a moment, he cannot will evil. Not only does Eve overwhelm Satan and evil, but also makes the good Adam weak in the face of her beauty (8.531–32). Adam places his reason at the feet of Eve’s fine attractiveness:

All higher knowledge in her presence
 falls
Degraded; Wisdom in discourse with
 her
Loses discountenanced, and like Folly
 shows;
Authority and Reason on her wait,
As one intended first, not after made
Occasionally; and, to consummate all,
Greatness of mind and Nobleness their
 seat
Build in her loveliest, and create an
 awe
About her, as a guard angelick placed
 (8.551–59).

Eve is so beautiful that all knowledge falls before her, moving Raphael to warn Adam: “Take heed lest passion sway / Thy judgement to do aught, which else free will / Would not admit” (8.635–36). The Angel warns Adam not to put too much passion in loving Eve, but to hold fast to the reason that Adam desires to place at Eve’s feet in adoration. Eve’s beauty is not representative of grace, but rather, is something that will

eventually lead Adam to sin.

Milton’s description of the perfect marriage in *Paradise Lost* is beautiful: Adam and Eve pray to God and then enter the marriage bower hand in hand, wholly giving over all love to one another (4.737–43). At the very least, the description is reminiscent of Tobit’s humility with Sarah, as they too pray to God before going to sleep on their wedding day (Tob. 8:4–9). In book nine Milton contrasts this original pure state of marriage with the lustful condition after the fall. The nuptial act very quickly loses its beauty as Adam and Eve lust for one another, physically carrying out their passion and then “. . . up they rose / As from unrest; and, each the other viewing, / Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds / How darkened” (9.1051–54). In the sexual act after the fall, Milton sees the beauty in

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intercourse as completely gone. C. S. Lewis calls this “one of Milton’s failures”,⁵ as Milton goes from one extreme to the other in his attempt to show the total corruption of man after the fall, ultimately implying that after the Original Sin there is no more reason or grace in sexual union. To the contrary, tradition points out that “after the fall, marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one’s own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving” (CCC 1609). Although there is indeed imperfection and often lust in the relationship between man and woman, marriage is a means to battle the corruption.

Milton’s misconception of marriage is grounded in his failure to understand the

relationship between man and woman. When describing the creation of man and woman, Milton demonstrates his idea of their inequality: “Whence true authority in men; though both / Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed; / . . . He for God only, she for God in him” (4.295–96, 299). The problem with these words is that it implies love as one-directional. Eve is made for Adam, and Adam is made for God, but not Adam for Eve. Eve’s willing subservience to Adam is one which recognizes man as the highest being to whom she can associate. She calls Adam “author”, “disposer”, her “glory”, her “perfection”, “all repose”, etc, terms that are only (biblically or not) used for God alone (4.425–48, 5.28–29). Eve sees Adam as her God. She tells him, “My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst / Unargued I obey: So God ordains; / God is thy law, thou mine: To know no more / Is woman’s happiest knowledge, and her praise” (4.635–38). Eve chooses Adam as her law, Adam as her end, Adam as her God. She must “know no more” than man as her ruler, must not aspire to Godly things, as man does.

In other words, it is in her husband’s hands to choose how much freedom his wife should have, what laws his wife should obey. The husband, in this perfect marriage of Milton’s, is the ruler of the wife in the same way that God is ruler over him. Eve is only happy and praiseworthy when she recognizes this dictatorship. Nevertheless, such subjection is disordered, for, according to the Bible, this kind of domination was a curse of the fall: “to thy husband’s will / Thine shall submit; he over thee shall rule” (10.195–96; Gen. 3:16). If Adam is not made for Eve, then there is no reason for him to love her: she is but a thing to him, so inferior that no true conjugal love can take place. Eve, made for God through Adam, can only get to God through Adam: there is no direct communication between her and the Lord, nor is there mutual help or love between her and Adam.

In this perfect world, Adam’s intelligence is far greater than that of Eve’s (8.531–59), to the point that there can be

no real intellectual communication between the two, Adam having no “like consort” to himself. Indeed, Adam frequently corrects and instructs Eve, both before and after the fall (incl. 5.110–13; 9.337–41; 11.193, 224–25). In a rather eloquent scene, Raphael comes to Adam as a sort of intellectual friend, and the two discuss “abstruse” matters. Eve, like every good wife, rises to leave. Why? Not because she could not understand or be delighted by the speech, but, according to Milton, because she desired hearing the discussion as related by Adam: “he, she knew, would intermix / Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute / With conjugal caresses: from his lip / Not words alone pleased her” (8.55–57). Her intellect is so poor that she does not have the *desire* for knowledge, preferring, in fact, Adam’s “conjugal caresses” over a real intel-

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lectual discourse. This indicates a separation of the mind from love, which is faulty, since love involves the whole person. In this way, Eve is presented as an image of passion, and Adam as an image of reason. The two, being so separated, can have no real relationship, for although Adam is able to communicate on the level of reason, Eve enjoys reason only when it is filled with digressions of lovemaking.

In *Paradise Lost*, the comparison between the fall of Eve and the fall of Adam embodies Milton’s view of the inferiority of women. This personification takes form in the separate motives of Eve and Adam to receive the forbidden fruit. The devil first flatters Eve, but he does so by telling her it is “right thou shouldst be obeyed” (9.570).

Eve is attracted to the fruit the devil offers her not simply because the devil convinces her that God’s command is nothing, but because she desires to be queen over Adam: “so to add what wants / In female sex, the more to draw his love, / And render me more equal; and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superiour” (9.821–25). While Eve aspires to be God, her main motive in these desires only goes so far as seizing authority over Adam. C. S. Lewis understands the contrast between Eve’s and Adam’s motive to sin, Adam’s motive consisting in something far different:

Adam fell by uxoriousness. . . . Before he speaks to her [Eve], half-way through his inward monologue we find the decision already made—‘with thee Certain my resolution is to Die’. His sin is, of course, intended to be a less ignoble sin than hers. . . . He is at that moment when a man’s only answer to all that would restrain him is: ‘I don’t care’; that moment when we resolve to treat some lower or partial value as an absolute. . . . If conjugal love were the highest value in Adam’s world, then of course his resolve would have been the correct one. But if there are things that have an even higher claim on a man, if the universe is imagined to be such that, when the pinch comes, a man ought to reject wife and mother and his own life also, then the case is altered, and then Adam can do no good to Eve (as, in fact, he does no good) by becoming her accomplice.⁶

Adam sinned against God because he was “fondly overcome with female charm” (9.997–99). He rejects the command of God because he does not want to lose Eve. He is not deceived, but willingly chooses death to be with her. Milton’s God clarifies the hideousness of the fall, as He rebukes Adam:

Was she thy God, that her thou didst
obey
Before his voice? or was she made thy
guide,
Superior, or but equal, that to her

Thou didst resign thy manhood, and
the place
Wherein God set thee above her made
of thee,
And for thee, whose perfection far
excelled
Hers in all real dignity? (10.145–51).

Adam’s fall consisted in the fact that he allowed himself, the higher, to be ruled and brought low by a woman, who indeed was not only unequal to him, but less than him in any real sort of dignity or perfection. Indeed, according to Milton, Adam fell because he disobeyed God, but especially because he obeyed woman. “Thus it shall befall / Him, who, to worth in women overtrusting, / Lets her will rule: restraint she will not brook; / And, left to herself, if evil thence ensue, / She first his weak

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indulgence will accuse” (9.1181–85). In *Paradise Lost*, the first sin consists not simply in “man [preferring] himself to God” (CCC 398),⁷ but in Eve aspiring to greatness and Adam weakly allowing her to rule him. The comparison between the two falls capitulated the idea that man’s only fault in the fall is following the woman’s suggestion, whereas woman fell because she aspired not to be ruled by man. Every sinful act in history is thus linked to woman, whether directly or by the inability of man to rein her in (10.47). Thus, though problems in the world are “Inductive mainly to the sin of Eve . . . from Man’s effeminate slackness it begins” (11.519, 634).

In conclusion, Milton does not have an orthodox conception of marriage, for he

cannot see it as an institution of God for man and woman to serve Him as co-partners together for life, not only for the procreation and education of their children, but also for the good of the couple (CCC 1601). For Milton, only the perfect marriage is consequential, only a marriage that exists from before the fall, a marriage in which man dominates over woman because he is a superior being. This thinking is directly contrary to reality, for “Man and woman have been created . . . in perfect equality as human persons . . . in their respective beings as man and woman” (CCC 369). Nowhere in the Bible is it stated that woman must be submissive to man because she is somehow a lesser being. Rather, women are to be submissive because of love, not inferiority, for, indeed, this is the same submissive love of Christ, who humbled Himself for the sake of man. St. Paul, when he speaks of wives submitting to their hus-

bands as to the Lord, clarifies his statement by telling the husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:22–33). Milton cannot understand the self-giving, loving union between man and woman in marriage or the relationship between male and female. His absurd and modern ideas of woman being inferior to man therefore spring from a series of misunderstandings and falsehoods. It is for this reason that Belloc wrote of Milton: “For the affection of women (I mean for the receiving of it) Milton was very ill fitted, and for the giving of it not fitted at all.”⁸

This is a harsh statement, and yet, for one to have so blatantly attempted to destroy the blessed unity of marriage between man and woman, the statement is well deserved. Milton has struck at the very heart of humanity. He has assaulted one of God’s own gifts, a gift that effects a grace to

pull man out of the pits of sin (CCC 1609).

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References

- 1 Belloc, Hilaire, *Milton* (London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1935), 147.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 145–46. Note that the first edition of *Paradise Lost* was in 1667, more than twenty years after Mary Powell left him. Milton had ample time to develop anti-feminine theology.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 146, 151.
- 5 Lewis, Clive Staples, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 123–24.
- 6 Lewis, 122–23.
- 7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
- 8 Belloc, Hilaire, *Milton* (London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1935), 45.