10 Milton and the sexes

When the Archangel Michael, toward the end of *Paradise Lost*, foresees the church attacked from without by persecution and from within by 'specious forms' so that 'truth shall retire / Bestuck with slanderous darts' (12.534–6), he summons along with the figure of Truth a picture of St Sebastian stuck full of arrows: who, however, did not die of those wounds but had to be murdered by temporal power all over again. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, addressed to the 'church' of learned believers, is similarly susceptible to recurrent volleys; and his figure of Woman brought to life in Eve, who is a type of the church and perhaps of the poem, has (for being too free, or for not being free enough) been a primary target, with similar resurgent vitality.

In current discussions of Milton's treatment of 'the two great sexes', especially the one supposed less great, most of the darts adhere to his enactments in Eve of the Pauline analogies of marriage, both to the human body (with the husband as head), and to the spousals of Christ and the church – analogies that the modern mind does not perceive as complimentary to womanhood. Of course Milton's Adam and Eve are dramatic characters, not only types or allegories, but Milton does incorporate into their marriage the fusion of divinity and humanity that for him was the prime hope of the world. Like the apostles, he considered it his calling to prepare for 'an extraordinary effusion of *Gods* Spirit upon every age, and sexe' (YP 1: 566; Acts 2: 17–18). And although his hope of spiritual rebirth for the body politic was disappointed, he never abandoned his hope for the rebirth of the specific men and women who would read his poem.

One measure of the power of Milton's poetry is that readers so often either love it or hate it, and that those who hate it nevertheless go on writing about it. Recently in the vanguard of anti-Miltonists have been feminist critics offended by Milton's masculine outlook, his acceptance of the Genesis story and the Pauline tradition concerning the submission of wives, and the misogynous diatribes he allows some of his dramatis personae, such as fallen Adam in *Paradise Lost* and the chorus of Danites in *Samson Agonistes*. They

Johannes Duvet, *The Blessing of the Marriage of Adam and Eve* (c. 1540–55)

join other politically oriented critics in urging that literary scholars eschew indiscriminate apologetics and cast a cold eye on whatever misognyist, xenophobic, homophobic, or elitist stereotyping of 'the other' the canonical literary 'masters' have, advertently or inadvertently, given warrant for. At the same time, many who love Milton's poems, including many women, find that his regard for the *quality* of human beings of both sexes offers more toward mutual respect than the problem of *e*quality can undo.

In seventeenth-century England, women did not hold civil or ecclesiastical offices, attend universities, or engage in the major professions. Milton shared some of the assumptions that caused these limitations, but provided a method for interpreting scriptural precedents meant to expand the disciplined liberties of a regenerate people. He rejected the double standard of sexual conduct, arguing not that women should be promiscuous, but that men should be chaste: since chastity, like all temperance, liberates one's power of apprehension (especially of 'celestiall songs') and since, he added to the fury of some later readers, the man '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' (YP 1: 892). He did not, however, deny to women perfectibility in any spiritual or moral gifts; and he insisted on the spiritual compatibility of husband and wife and defined marriage as mutual assistance in all *'the helps and comforts of domestic life'*. He did not think wifehood coextensive with womanhood, finding 'the properties and excellencies of a wife set out only from domestic vertues; if they extend furder, it diffuses them into the notion of som more common duty then matrimonial' (YP 2: 612–13).

Milton's views on the relations of the sexes may be found in a series of tracts on domestic liberty; in his *Christian Doctrine* 1.10, 'Of the Special Government of Man before the Fall' – which adds a defence of patriarchal polygamy – and 2.15, of 'Private Duties'; and in certain of his poems, preeminently *Paradise Lost*. All are are rooted in the biblical creation story and hold marriage in extraordinarily high regard. The crux of Milton's account of the relations of the sexes, then, is his interpretation of Genesis 1–3 taken together with the rest of the Scriptures, and especially of the words of the Creator in Genesis 2: 18. 'And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.'

Although Milton's works may be read on their own merit, their flavour is more distinct and more complex if we know something of their cultural contexts: the conflux of classical and Christian thought and art which we call the Renaissance; and the effort to return the church to something closer to its scriptural origins which we call the Reformation. As a participant in both

these movements, Milton looked to the first marriage, as recorded in Genesis, as his source of first principles; and he interpreted that story with a Renaissance regard for human dignity and the goodness of the visible creation, including sexuality, as a divine gift.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Zeus creates Woman in revenge for Man's acquisition of forbidden knowledge from Prometheus; her name is Pandora, and she comes equipped with a box of evils. The Hebrew book of origins differs from the Greek in radical ways: instead of gods of both sexes who are a part of nature, and hence unreliable and sometimes hostile to humankind, it represents a transcendent maker of nature who 'created man in his own image . . . male and female created he them' (Gen. 1: 27), pronounced this whole creation good, and blessed it; and instead of providing Woman as punishment, it represents her as meet help: that is, as a fitting aid and companion in the care of the world and the procreation commended in the callings to dress and keep the garden and to increase and multiply. That little word *help*, however, supported by the graphic description in Genesis 2 of God making Eve from Adam's rib, suggests a sex that is subordinate, perhaps created only secondarily in God's image and so spiritually inferior. Coupled with the story that Eve was the first to disobey God and enticed her husband to do likewise, Genesis thus affords excuses for misogyny in spite of its ameliorations in comparison with other accounts of human origins, including those of our own age.

The Hebrew Bible continues with the epic of the monotheistic and patriarchal Israelites who established a theocracy ordered by holy laws amidst enemies who worshipped deities of both sexes and of undependable moral character, some of whom required child sacrifice, mutilation, ritual prostitution, and other violations of civil rights, which Milton abhorred and personified as Moloch, Mammon, and Belial. This process, once seen as unifying the human family under one 'Father' and freeing it by divine law from the inequities of human power, is now viewed by some feminists as establishing the rule of invisible (paternal) over visible (maternal) power.

The leaders of the Reformation, by treating the Old Testament typologically as the prefiguration of the New and as the pattern of their own experience, encouraged patriarchal language. In addition, they removed from the liturgy and from church decoration much of the feminine imagery associated with the Virgin Mary and other women saints. On the other hand, they improved the status of women by diminishing the authority of the early 'Fathers of the Church' with their sceptical attitudes toward women and marriage, by insisting on women's spiritual equality, by commending marriage to all (including priests) as the source of holy offspring and civic

virtue, and by regarding the family as a 'little church and a little state', hierarchical to be sure but giving each member dignity and importance. Writers of conduct books stressed St Paul's teaching that the husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church and cherish her as his own body – advice meant to honour and protect women but couched in metaphors that now sound demeaning and have been outstripped as women have moved increasingly into arenas 'more common . . . th[a]n matrimonial'.

Milton believed that the Bible was true, but that the individual conscience guided by the Holy Spirit had a good deal of leeway in interpreting it, measured always by the rule of charity: trust in the goodness of God and commitment to the well-being of humankind. He believed also that next to the relation between each person and God, the relation of husband and wife was the chief source of personal happiness or misery. His task both in his polemical and his poetic works on marriage was to adhere to the spirit of his primary source while interpreting it with the greatest charity. By contrast with many classical analogues and with interpretations of Scripture that Milton thought tyrannical, his matrimonial ideals and especially his representation of the first marriage in *Paradise Lost* reflect a libertarian belief in the original goodness – now wounded by sin but recoverable by grace and hard work – of the whole creation, including man, woman, and sexuality. And the *quality* of this goodness depends partly on Milton's sense that to be a 'help' is not servile but a calling and pleasure that men, women, and angels share with their maker.

Thanks to three centuries of progress toward liberty, which Milton helped to promote, the idea that woman was made for man, or that any segment of the human family is subordinate to any other, has been discredited. Milton himself narrowed the gender gap considerably. The emphasis in his 'divorce' tracts is on mutuality and spiritual likeness, with a reservation of superior authority to the husband. His acceptance of patriarchal stances is now under attack, with reason. I would suggest, however, that what Milton does (especially in his poems) toward revising the attitudes of his contemporaries, short of repudiating Judaic and Christian tradition with its manifold contributions toward civility and charity, is on the whole on the side of human liberty and dignity; and that if we indiscriminately repudiate *him*, and that tradition with him, we are likelier to get an increase of barbarism than of justice. To follow out the paths Milton mapped is usually to proceed toward fuller awareness of the plenitude of potentiality for goodness and blessedness in each human soul.

Milton was born into an age when poets spent a great deal of ink and breath on the proposition that although some women are unattainable

divinities, few are both 'true, and faire'. John Donne (who is Milton's most diverse and prolific recent predecessor in poetic exploration of the relations of the sexes) either echoes or parodies this and other proverbial views in early comic songs and elegies that advise men to 'hope not for minde in women' but make directly for 'the Centrique part' (90, 127, 66). Milton, however, set himself early to celebrate those in whom 'good and faire in one person meet', preferring above all poets Dante and Petrarch, 'the two famous renowners of *Beatrice* and *Laura* who never write but honour of them to whom they devote their verse, displaying sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression' (YP 1: 890). Milton did not publish any erotic poems of the cynical, frivolous, enticing, complaining, or repining kinds with which the early seventeenth century teemed. In fact, apart from 'O nightingale' and the sublime and pure love lyrics within *Paradise Lost*, he published no English poems in the usual amorous genres at all. A few of Milton's seventeenth-century predecessors, however – most notably, again, Donne – had begun to address women not only as wives, mothers, and objects of erotic desire but also as examples of more virtues than the one of 'honesty' or chastity usually assigned to them, and as spiritually and intellectually equal and eloquent friends. Milton is of their party.

Several of Milton's English poems address women in non-erotic ways. His first, written when he was seventeen, undertakes the delicate task of consoling his sister on the death of her infant daughter. His early 'Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester' places the Marchioness 'high . . . in glory' next to Rachel, who similarly died bearing her second child, and whom Dante seats next to Mary in a heaven well populated with women. 'Methought I saw my late espoused saint' commemorates a wife of whom he trusts to have 'full sight . . . in heaven . . . vested all in white, pure as her mind'; although in his blindness he cannot see her face, 'Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined / So clear, as in no face with more delight'. Other sonnets, too, contain 'nothing but praise'. 'Lady, that in the prime of earliest youth' encourages a young girl whose 'growing virtues' have evidently aroused annoyance, as virtues sometimes do, and who has nevertheless serenely continued to 'labour up the hill of heavenly truth' with only compassion for her detractors. 'Daughter to that good Earl' commends a woman in whom he sees reborn all the virtues of her father, a leading jurist Milton deemed of the highest integrity. 'When faith and love which parted from thee never', in memory of a woman he calls 'my Christian friend', assures her that her good endeavours, led and clad by Faith, 'speak the truth of thee in glorious themes / Before the judge'. These commendations of the spiritual victories of actual women, with in some cases a Dantean

gorgeousness of heavenly imagery, are a refreshing change from the prevailing poetry of amorous or courtly compliment.

In addition, Milton wrote six Italian sonnets and three Latin epigrams on women largely in praise of their speech and their singing – they are fellow artists in Milton's own vocation of reharmonizing Heaven and earth – and an accolade, in *Arcades*, to the Dowager Countess of Derby for her patronage of this vital function of the arts. *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (*Comus*) gives its young heroine vigorous moral views, a spirited resistance to evil, and a receptivity to grace that embody and adumbrate Milton's most serious and consistent themes. Moreover, Milton's graces and muses, especially the Muse of *Paradise Lost*, link what might be called the feminine principle to the act of poetic creation itself. The Celestial Muse appears to be a female persona of the Holy Spirit – supposing that all 'spirits when they please / Can either sex assume' (*PL* 1.423–4) – or perhaps an offspring of the inspiring Spirit and the aspiring mind, the matrix wherein the divine begetting and the human conception of the poem fuse.

A good deal of attention has been given to Milton's female horrors, though only one of them is human: the loathsome biform figure of Sin, and Dalila, if you read her as the embodiment of meretricious female sexuality used to exploit and entrap. But there are plenty of male horrors, too: Satan, Death, Moloch, Belial, Mammon, Chemos, Comus, and the like all caricature male forms of cruelty, deception, and sexual rapacity in at least an even-handed way.

Milton's definitions of marriage – the only sexual relation his chaste ardour admitted – are found in five tracts written in the 1640s as a part of his programme to advocate religious, civil, and domestic liberty for sober and religious men – and, to an extent, women – but also, one supposes, under some pressure from his own difficult marital situation. He had married in 1642 (in spite of the civil war between the King and the Parliament which Milton supported) seventeen-year-old Mary Powell, of an Oxfordshire Royalist family, who after a month of marriage went home for a visit and neither came back nor answered Milton's letters, Oxford having become the headquarters of the King, and Mary's family (as Edward Phillips comments in his *Life of Milton* (1694)) beginning 'to repent them of having matched the eldest daughter of the family to a person so contrary to them in opinion'. The first of these tracts was *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes, From the bondage of the Canon Law, and other mistakes, to Christian freedom, guided by the Rule of Charity*, published unsigned and unlicensed in 1643, during the deliberations of the Westminster Assembly, and again, augmented and initialled, in 1644. His proposals were rejected

and attacked in print, in Parliament, and from the pulpit – without, Milton complained, being carefully read or answered with reasoned argument. Shortly after the publication of the second edition, Milton learned that the respected reformer Martin Bucer had expressed similar views. Expecting to be 'fully justified' by so notable an authority, he translated the large portion of Bucer's *Judgment* that concerned divorce and published it, this time with the licenser's authorization but still with little success, in 1644. In 1645 he produced *Colasterion*, an angry reply to his detractors, and *Tetrachordon*, whose title means a four-stringed instrument, the four strings being the four chief places in Scripture concerning marriage: Genesis 1: 27–8 and 2: 18, 23–4; Deuteronomy 24: 1–2; Matthew 5: 31–2 and 19: 3–11; and 1 Corinthians 7: 10–16. The purpose of *Tetrachordon* is to show that despite canonical interpretation of the words of Christ in Matthew as stricter than the law of Moses, these four 'strings' are really in tune with each other. The hostility with which this closely reasoned exercise in case divinity was received elicited two sonnets, 'I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs' and 'A book was writ of late called *Tetrachordon*; / And woven close, both matter, form and style' – a proceeding Milton never lost hope would attract intelligent readers.

The arguments in these tracts are both close-woven and extensive, but their gist is that Christ did not abrogate the law of Moses permitting divorce, which would put God in the position of having colluded with sin, but spoke specifically to the arrogance of the Pharisees. Marriage was given by God for the good of man; a marriage that fulfils none of its purposes is not 'what God hath joined together'. Since the spiritual relation of husband and wife is its true form, followed by the procreation of children and, as a lesser though important cause, the 'mutual benevolence' of the marriage bed, to allow divorce for physical infidelity but not for fundamental spiritual discord turns upside down the purposes of the marriage covenant. To the charge that liberalizing divorce laws would give trivial and licentious persons an excuse to change partners at whim, Milton replies characteristically that the liberties of good and serious persons are more important than the restraint of the vicious, who are unfaithful to their marriage vows anyway, while good people in intolerable marriages are robbed of the energy to serve their families, callings, and countries.

In the course of these arguments Milton indulges in passages of what we would now call 'sexist language', especially where he addresses Deuteronomy 24 (which unlike Milton's proposal allows only a *man* to put away his wife) or canonists who thought that the divorce laws were only for 'afflicted wives': 'Palpably uxorious! who can be ignorant that woman was

created for man, and not man for woman; and that a husband may be injur'd as insufferably in mariage as a wife[?]' (YP 2: 324). He explicates Genesis 1.27 by agreeing with St Paul that 'the woman is not primarily and immediatly the image of God, but in reference to the man. *The head of the woman*, saith he, 1 *Cor.* 11. *is the man: he the image and glory of God, she the glory of the man*: not he for her, but she for him.' Then, with only partial mitigation, he adds:

> Nevertheless man is not to hold her as a servant, but receives her into a part of that empire which God proclaims him to, though not equally, yet largely, as his own image and glory: for it is no small glory to him, that a creature so like him, should be made subject to him. Not but that particular exceptions may have place, if she exceed her husband in prudence and dexterity, and he contentedly yeeld, for then a superior and more naturall law comes in, that the wiser should govern the lesse wise, whether male or female.

This habit of taking with one hand while giving with the other at least leaves the tracts with some openings for discourse; but the passage continues with perhaps the most stereotypical of Milton's observations, that

> seeing woman was purposely made for man, and he her head, it cannot stand before the breath of this divine utterance, that man the portraiture of God, joyning to himself for his intended good and solace an inferiour sexe, should so becom her thrall, whose wilfulnes or inability to be a wife frustrates the occasionall end of her creation, but that he may acquitt himself to freedom by his naturall birthright, and that indeleble character of priority which God crown'd him with . . . She is not to gain by being first in the transgression, that man should furder loose to her, because already he hath lost by her means. (YP 2: 589–90)

Yet in spite of this stung resort to the convention of attributing inferiority, and the first sin, to all women, Milton redefines marriage in language of thorough mutuality as 'meet and happy conversation' in 'conjugall fellowship' with 'a fit conversing soul', conferring the 'dignity & blessing' of the 'mutual enjoyment' of a love 'begot in Paradise by that sociable & helpful aptitude which God implanted between man and woman toward each other'. Each is 'the copartner of a sweet and gladsome society', fed by a 'coequal & *homogeneal* fire' which 'cannot live nor subsist, unlesse it be mutual'. Marriage was ordained by God 'in the beginning before the fall, when man and woman were both perfect' and is still meant to fulfil God's promise of 'meet help' though 'not now in perfection, as at first, yet still in proportion as things now are' (YP 2: 246, 251–5, 308–9). In marriage 'there must be first a mutuall help to piety, next to civill fellowship of love and amity, then to generation, so to household affairs, lastly the remedy of

incontinence'; it is a covenant 'the essence whereof . . . is in relation to another, the making and maintaining causes thereof are all mutual, and must be a communion of spiritual and temporal comforts' (YP 2: 599, 630).

In *Paradise Lost* the 'essential form' of marriage becomes live experience, represented as it was 'in the beginning before the fall, when man and woman were both perfect'. Writers on Genesis in the century after the poem's publication wistfully echo Milton on the happiness of married life before the Fall; but the echoes extend to Eve as delightful pleasure, not the intellectual and spiritual companion or the free and responsible member of the human community Milton shows her to be. An anonymous *History of Adam and Eve* (1753), for example, waxes Miltonic about nuptial bliss but reverts to the old misogynist notion that the prohibition itself attracted Eve to the Tree, without benefit of Serpent: 'The Prohibition makes Eve curious; for it is awakening the curiosity of a Woman to forbid her anything. The Prohibition excites and inflames her desires, which are generally violent for things which are permitted, but insatiable for those forbidden. Prevail'd upon by that Impatience, which dug the Grave of their Happiness, she forsakes *Adam*, to enjoy without witness or reproach the Sight of a Fruit, which she esteem'd the most exquisite of all; only because it was forbidden' (2). One of Milton's most extensive revisions of traditional misogyny is his invention of motives more provident of Eve's dignity and of ours.

Many women who have recently written about Milton – Barbara Lewalski, Joan Bennett, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, Stelle Revard, Irene Samuel, Kathleen Swaim, and Joan Webber, to name a few – read his poem as addressed to their humanity, unhaunted by anxieties of influence. At the same time, 'resistant' readers who read from the point of view of gender – for example, Jackie DiSalvo, Sandra Gilbert, Christine Froula, Marcia Landy, Mary Nyquist, Patricia Parker, and, without being what she calls a terrorist of the text, Maureen Quilligan (178) – challenge sympathetic readings or historicize the text in diverse ways (see Shullenberger). Like the women's movement itself, feminist critics divide into differing camps: some want women (and women literary characters) to have the same power and privileges men (they believe) have always had, while others find 'women's' values worth extending and suggest radical re-evaluation of the concepts of power that have prevailed. The latter are more akin to Milton himself. For however many of Milton's epic voices call Eve 'the inferior', the poem as a whole gives at least as much praise to qualities often considered 'feminine' as to those considered 'masculine'. His major poems cast a great deal of scorn on the traditional epic hero's self-assertiveness and will to power, represented by Satan and his fellow vandals and terrorists; and they commend

as more heroic the 'feminine' virtues of gentleness, patience, humility, mercy, and devotion, 'by small / Accomplishing great things, by things deemed weak / Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise / By simply meek' (12.566–9), making it impossible to assign these qualities according to the stereotypes of gender. Milton satirizes showy competition and violent displays of strength, ridicules the male notion that one can pursue fame and glory by flinging hardware and maiming flesh, and makes – as Genesis does – the nurturing 'woman's work' of dressing and keeping the garden, together with increasing and multiplying, the shared and dignified concern of both sexes: the health and beauty of the earth and the growth of souls become in *Paradise Lost* clearly worthier of human effort than acquisition and exploitation.

The truer 'manly' virtues such as fortitude, clear-headed justice, fidelity to principle, and reason unswayed by passion, and 'womanly' ones like sympathy, responsiveness, and the desire to keep relationships reciprocal, are not strictly divided between Adam and Eve: although they do not always exercise all, both are capable of all. In the separation colloquy it is Eve's adherence to principles very like Milton's own that moves her to decline to let Satan's threat interfere with their liberties and the pursuit of their callings; it is Adam's respect for open dialogue and his sense of true relation, needing freedom, that move him to accede to her wish. But at the Fall these qualities run to excess in Eve's ambition and Adam's 'effeminacy' or uxoriousness, when he puts the immediate concerns of personal relations above the long-term claims of truth.

If Milton is to present these virtues in their perfection 'before the fall' in a drama of two human characters, the obvious way is to let the woman exemplify the by no means inferior qualities that are linked to the feminine. If he wants to bring man and woman closer to a 'conjugall fellowship' of beings who are more 'like' than convention considered them, he can show Eve and Adam both capable, in proportion, of both sorts of virtue, altering the stereotype of women in the direction of equality, not by a sudden assertion that his contemporary male readers (and he himself) would find hard to swallow, but by an intermingling and infusion of thought and imagery that will open the imagination and dispel the hardness of heart that mere confrontation often exacerbates. This it seems to me is what Milton does, or what happens to him at the hands of the Celestial Muse.

The imagery of *Paradise Lost* gives at least equal and sometimes superior value to constructs of the feminine. The masculine perspective of the text is everywhere balanced by its openness of form. Its style combines a sinewy firmness of structure with an infinitely penetrable music. Its language mates

linear logic with radiant consciousness; the design is sturdily architectural, but the radiant consciousness so suffuses that form with dance that subsequence and precedence are constantly transposed. Its male and female imagery is distinguished by reciprocity and exchange, inscribed especially in Raphael's astronomical discourse (8.66–178) just before Adam's uneasy though delighted attempt to square Eve's theoretical inferiority with his sense of her 'greatness of mind' (8.521–59). What Raphael says about heavenly bodies should free Adam and us from oversimple assumptions about the domestic hierarchy, such as that the 'greater should not serve / The less':

> consider first, that great
> Or bright infers not excellence: the earth
> Though, in comparison of heaven, so small,
> Nor glistering, may of solid good contain
> More plenty than the sun that barren shines,
> Whose virtue on it self works no effect,
> But in the fruitful earth; there first received
> His beams, unactive else, their vigour find. (8.87–97)

Even for 'him' it is not good to be alone. If, in fact, the whole heavens circle the earth, their swiftness serves 'thee earth's habitant', but 'What if the sun / Be centre to the world, and other stars / By his attractive virtue and their own / Incited, dance about him various rounds?' What if the earth 'industrious of her self fetch day', and her light be 'as a star' to the moon, their light 'Reciprocal', and the whole universal dance be so too, 'other suns perhaps / With their attendant moons . . . Communicating male and female light, / Which two great sexes animate the world'? (8.99, 122–5). This discourse on the 'new philosophy' throws in doubt ancient mythic sexual stereotypes and opens the concepts of inferiority and service to 'various' interpretations. As Stevie Davies, Michael Lieb, Joseph Summers, and Kathleen Swaim, among others, have variously and abundantly shown, the two sexes, both great, both in their natural innocence communicating light, constitute the universe and the fabric of the poem. Its characters and its bardic voice are sexually distinct, but the *poem* is androgynous.

With these matters in mind, let us examine four critical cruxes – a tetrachord, or perhaps tetradiscord, of places in *Paradise Lost* most likely to disturb people who read in a gender-conscious way. And as we do, let us imagine, following out James Turner's suggestion of the couple-reader, a serious yet lively witted seventeenth-century family reading aloud together, considering and debating the implications of these passages on the internal

model of Adam and Eve themselves, who read the book of nature and discuss its implications in a traditionally gendered yet radically open way, Eve asking imaginative questions and Adam, intellectually stimulated by them, exercising his reasoning mind.

The first, in which we look over Satan's shoulder as he gets his first glimpse of Adam and Eve, begins by assuming a greater physical, spiritual, and moral equality for Eve than she had ever enjoyed before; but it ends with the lines that have, perhaps, most offended gender-oriented women readers:

> Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
> Godlike erect, with native honour clad
> In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
> And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
> The image of their glorious maker shone,
> Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
> Severe but in true filial freedom placed;
> Whence true authority in men; though both
> Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
> For contemplation he and valour formed,
> For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
> He for God only, she for God in him. (4.288–99)

Both are 'lords of all', full of divine attributes, and placed, both *filius* and *filia*, in filial freedom. Eve is included, even, in 'true authority', though the qualification that follows (at least to Satan's seeming) reserves 'greater authority' to the husband: Milton attributes dominion, the divine attribute women were thought to lack, less largely to Eve than to Adam, though later he shows the animals of Eden 'duteous at her call' (9.521). We should note, too, his improvement on the 'he not for her, but she for him' of *Tetrachordon*. Some of us might be better pleased if Milton had written 'Both equal, though their sex not equal seemed' and 'Both for God and for God in each other', concocting a sort of Leveller's fantasy on Genesis and demolishing domestic hierarchy in one blow, much to the jeopardy of his credibility among his peers. Since he did not, we might ask whether his 'two' represent two kinds of goodness that can in each reader go, like Adam and Eve, hand in hand.

Equality under the law is a remedial idea – invented for a fallen race not much given to rejoicing in the goodness, much less the superiority, of others – needed to rectify injustices that no one in a state of sinless blessedness would consider committing. If we are to read Milton's poem with pleasure we need to get rid of Satan's dreary habit of thinking himself impaired by

another's goodness. Postlapsarian wrongs occur when a sex or other group thinks itself superior, or any one person is exploited or scorned. Does Milton's poetry contribute to these injustices, or work to dissolve them by joyful reception of each person? What seems to matter most to him is the *each*ness of each. Each angel is a separate *kind* or species, like Dante's 'angeli festanti, / Ciascun distinto de fulgore et d'arte' (*Paradiso* 31.132–3); each human soul is a special making, jointly fashioned by herself or himself and God. This celebration of particularity – Ingram and Swaim's *Concordance* lists 151 uses of *each* in *Paradise Lost* – cries out for the highest regard for each created being regardless of place. We have since discarded some of the considerations of place Milton had to deal with, but we need not discard love of the distinct lustre of particular persons where each self is fuller of light the more it rejoices in other selves.

The second string of our chord or discord is Adam's perplexed avowal that though he knows Eve 'the inferior, in the mind / And inward faculties',

> 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 angelic placed. (8.541–59)

Adam's state in this passage is more complex than either Raphael or psychologists of 'erotic valuation' give him credit for. Clearly, he needs to retrieve his 'wisdom' and balance. Yet a passage from Paul, less often observed than the notorious ones on the obedience of wives, exhorts 'all the saints' to be 'of one accord, of one mind', as Adam says he and Eve are (8.603–5); and, Paul continues, 'in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves' (Phil. 1: 1; 2: 2–3). Although there is a good deal else going on in their separate confessions of admiration for each other, Adam and Eve are 'all the saints' and their marriage is the type of the early church to be re-formed. So Milton is in the tricky position of needing to express through them both the scriptural not-quite-equality of husband and wife and the scriptural more-than-equality of a holy community – and on top of that, the erotic delight and mutual exaltation of lovers, with the risk of idolatry and the need for a responsive relation to the rest of creation by those who enjoy that 'sum of earthly bliss' (8.522). Insofar as they are a family, Adam and Eve participate in a hierarchy that gives the male 'greater authority'. Insofar as they are a church, each esteems the other 'better'. A world

in which each person cares 'for the things of others' (Phil. 2: 4) and rejoices in *each* other's goodness must be a feast of splendours.

The third string is a double one. Eve's own views of her position shift even more radically than unfallen Adam's as she moves from naively innocent fallen perceptions. 'My author and disposer', she says to Adam in Book 4, 'what thou bid'st / Unargued I obey; so God ordains, / God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise' (635–8). (Is this allegation to be taken as the true sentiments of a poet who thought that 'all believers' are 'living temples, built by faith to stand, / Their own faith not another's' (12.520–8) and that 'fellowship ... fit to participate/ All rational delight' (8.389–91) is the true form of marriage?) But after she bites the fruit, Eve reverses her earlier over-simplification, wondering whether to 'keep the odds of knowledge in my power':

> 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
> Superior; for inferior who is free? (9.820–5)

If we set aside the fact that Eve is entirely deluded about the nature of the fruit, does her question have any validity? One answer to it is 'everybody', since in a universe constituted of plenitude and gradation (for the sake of diversity and unity) every being is 'inferior' in some sense to someone, yet all are free 'Till they enthrall themselves' (3.125). But in fact Eve is as self-governing as Adam. He needs her, she consents; and she (quite naturally and regularly) goes off alone on errands of art or mercy. Moreover, Milton often calls attention to the moral power of subordinates: Eve; Abdiel; the mocked, blind and imprisoned Samson; the politically powerless young Hebrew hero of *Paradise Regained* – none are impeded while they keep intact their will to goodness. Does anything in Milton's poem prevent anyone (as Gilbert says it does women writers) of either sex from feeding her or his own exuberant creativity from Milton's world of light?

Apart from eating the fruit of one tree – which God has forbidden in order to remind them that 'it is he who hath made us, and not we ourselves' – it is hard to think of any honest and non-violent activity or pursuit of knowledge that Adam and Eve cannot both enjoy. *Neither* can engage in the professions, because law, medicine, and the clergy all treat the effects of the Fall. But they can create good government, health, liturgy, and pastoral care. They cannot, without the Fall, engage in armed warfare, but spiritual valour is surely requisite to both sexes, with the Spirit of Darkness aping animals

and entering through mists unseen. Unlike many predecessors, Milton did not think that sensuous pleasure was wicked nor that Adam and Eve fell because of erotic love. Their sexual bliss is matched by the spiritual intimacy of their prayers; and these set to music, along with their work and conversation, represent all wholesome arts and sciences. It is hard to think of anything worth doing that Adam and Eve do not, both, actually or tropologically do. Their work is mutual – only once does it fill typical gender roles, when Eve 'within, due at her hour / Prepared . . . dinner' while Adam 'sat' (5.299–304) – and unfallen Eve's love of fruits and flowers that 'at her coming sprang' is as needful as Adam's 'studious thoughts abstruse' (8.40–7) to ensure that their employments keep earth glorious. Their shared interests in work and coming children fit Carolyn Heilbrun's ideal modern symmetrical family. Sin can do nothing but impede these freedoms. When Satan perverts Eve's 'feminine' open, generous sympathy she loses both that ('Shall I . . . keep the odds') and her growing 'masculine' integrity learned from Adam, Raphael, and Abdiel. And when Adam colludes in the Fall he loses both that integrity and his growing 'feminine' bond with nature learned from Eve.

The fourth string, because it issues from their maker, redeemer, and judge, is the 'fundamental' of the chord, and so least susceptible of apologetics on grounds of context, multiplicity of voices, or the gradual education of the reader. The Judge asks 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)

These are salient lines for the reading family to wrestle with, then or now. What husband who had got this far in the poem would dare to gloat at them? Clearly, Milton agrees that it is the husband's 'part / And person' to 'bear rule' – at least this husband's, since his wife does not surpass him in prudence. We should not make the mistake of supposing, though, that the Judge is alluding to Adam's lack of 'government' in allowing Eve to leave his side: the 'filial freedom' in which both are created would then have been a lie in all its ramifications as a pattern for human institutions. The Judge censures Adam 'Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife, / And eaten of the tree concerning which / I charged thee' (10.198–200). Adam's

mistake is making Eve his 'God' and his 'guide' at the moment of the Fall, and so both losing his chance to be a means of grace to Eve and transmitting sin to all posterity. This passage, like the first, improves the language of the divorce tracts, in which he 'lost by her means'; here the responsibility belongs to both, though more to him. Yet if we take Milton's Creator–Redeemer to say (as he does not in Genesis) that men are by immutable nature far more excellent 'in all real dignity' than women, then we will each have to decide what this passage means for the value of the whole poem. If we acknowledge the biblical, Dantean, Miltonic patterns for the perfection of all protagonists, whatever their gender – that status has no effect on fullness of joy, that humility exalts, that service frees – we will not see or use this passage as a statement authorizing male arrogance. If we have noted Milton's dramatic decorum, his sense of limitless process in the works of this very Creator–Redeemer, and the interchange of attributes Eve and Adam have experienced in their unfallen lives together, we will not suppose that these words dashing Adam's disastrous dependency on the opinion of fallen Eve apply to all people through all time. Yet for male readers looking for ways to justify tyranny or female ones looking for reasons to abandon charity – which either could do only by ignoring the rest of the poem – this passage is prime grist, and we would do Milton an injustice if we did not point out the misuses that can be made of it in new contexts, or the ways in which both the failures and the graces of both characters can apply to all of us. The epic poet, 'with his many voices' as Homer says (*Odyssey* 22.393), lets us not only hear but *be* each character in turn. While each of us is mimetically being Eve and Adam, we gather in the possibilities of both.

Curiously, some people object to Eve's derivation from Adam, in spite of her original splendour in truth, beauty, wisdom, and sanctitude, who are unalarmed by the news that we are all derived from hairy bipeds called *Australopithecus afarensis*. Some resent her service of 'God in him' who recommend the narrower confines of 'self-servience' and have no interest in service of God at all. Some censure the slight imparity of perfections of Eve and Adam without lamenting our general inferiority to them both. Some think Eve unfree who do not protest the massive oppression of psychological theories that put each person and all action and affection into a few sexual categories and locate the genesis of all creativity in the vicinity of that portion of the male body on which 'Adam sat'. Some denounce Milton's fidelity to the scriptural idea of the family who accept the stupendous repression of spirit with which much criticism ignores the wellspring of holiness from which all value issues in *Paradise Lost*.

The 'woman question' in Milton will never be *decided*; good poems never

end. He was probably more serious about the relations of the sexes, more careful of their resonances, than any poet of or before his time, and of the happiness and holiness not only of a *Beatus vir* (Ps. 1 and 112), but also of a *Beata mulier*, a woman joyous in plenteous gifts, perhaps than any other poet of any time. He was radical in his insistence on women's spiritual completeness, responsibility, and fitness for 'all rational delight' and in his celebration of erotic bliss in the morning of creation. Perhaps no one else has depicted sexual happiness at once so lavishly and so purely. His loving portrait of Eve, not excusing her sin on any grounds, certainly not incapacity, but portraying her as a person of delightful mind as well as beautiful form, honour as well as charm, sanctitude as well as radiant looks and graceful gestures, moral searching as well as artistic creativity, asperity as well as gentleness, and a capacity for repentance and forgiveness as well as dutiful domesticity, raises her immeasurably above other Eves of art and story, opening new possibilities of dialogue for the reading family at every turn. To the small degree that Adam and Eve are 'higher' and 'lower' they are as two strings tuned to different pitches, to make harmony. It would be rude to ignore Milton's primary interest, and sad to miss his harmonies, in showing how good Adam and Eve are, and how many ways they are good, in an argument about precedence, as if jostling for a high place at the table kept us from enjoying the feast. The last shall be first, in any case. But it would be untrue to Milton, as well, not to give him the honest argument, based on thorough and thoughtful reading, that he looked for in vain from his early opponents. Such a reading can bring reader and text together in 'meet and happy conversation'.

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