

NEH Milton Lecture¹

Argument Not Less But More Heroic: Milton's Advent'rous Song in *Paradise Lost*

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As the opening lines of this solemn invocation to *Paradise Lost* lay out the poem's tragic theme of "Man's First Disobedience and the Fruit...whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the world, and all our woe, / With loss of Eden..." we can hear in them echoes of the beginnings of the great epic poems of the classical age that precede it: "the rage of Peleus' son Achilles...hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,"² in the *Iliad*; "the man of many devices who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the citadel of Troy,"³ in the *Odyssey*; and finally, "Arms I sing and the man who first from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate, came to Italy and Lavinian shores...till he should build a city...and the walls of lofty Rome,"⁴ in the *Aeneid*. This last differs from its Greek antecedents both in setting a limit to and in defining a purpose for the struggles of its hero, and Virgil's conditional tone—"till he should build a city"—has further resonances with Milton's lines, "till one greater Man / Restore us and regain the blissful seat." Our poet then calls upon the same "Heavn'ly Muse" who inspired Moses

¹ I wish to thank both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the College for making it possible for me to explore the writings of Milton through these past two years, and for providing funding for four of my colleagues to join me in a seminar that read *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost* last semester.

² *Iliad* 1. 1-3, *Homer; The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (Viking Penguin, 1990). All further citations are from this edition.

³ *Odyssey* 1.1-3, *Homer: The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray, 2 vols. (Loeb, Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press; London: William Heineman, 1960).

⁴ *Aeneid* 1.1-2, *Virgil*, trans. H.R. Fairclough, 2 vols. Loeb, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press; London: William Heineman, 1960). All further citations are from this edition.



on Mt. Sinai and then later dwelt in Solomon's Temple on Mt. Sion, where the sacred brook of Siloa flows nearby, holy places that supercede Mt. Helicon—"th'Aonian Mount" mentioned later—and the fountain of Aganippe, haunt of the muses of classical poetry. At "Siloa's Brook" the long opening sentence comes to a partial stop with a semicolon, before the poet proceeds:

I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous Song
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th'Aonian Mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme. (l. 12-16)⁵

This startling word 'advent'rous' alerts us to the nature of the song we are about to hear and by implication the character of its bard, suggesting an endeavor full of risk and peril, one that is daring, possibly even rash.⁶ This poet, by contrast with his predecessors, intimates that it is not enough for him to present as hero an ideal man, some solitary and absolute sort of individual, capable of prodigious deeds and superhuman endurance in the midst of conflict; an 'advent'rous song' requires something else, something more.

This difference even is even more explicit in the proem or prologue to Book Nine, when, as the poet leaves the long conversation between Raphael and Adam related in the previous four books, he announces that he "...now must change / Those notes to Tragic," (9.5-6) continuing:

...Sad task, yet argument
Not less but more Heroic than the wrath
Of stern Achilles on his Foe pursu'd
Thrice Fugitive about Troy Wall; or rage

⁵ *Complete Poems and Major Prose of John Milton*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press / Bobbs-Merrill, 1973). All citations and quotations of Milton's poetry are taken from this edition. Hereafter cited as Hughes.

⁶ OED 2,3,4.

Of Turnus for Lavinia disepous'd,
Or Neptune's ire or Juno's, that so long
Perplex'd the Greek and Cytherea's Son...(9.14-20)

He remembers Achilles for the implacable avenging wrath that consumes him in his pursuit of Hector around the walls of Troy; Turnus is recalled as the jilted fiancé of Lavinia and for his jealous rage at Aeneas, who is mentioned only obliquely as 'Cytherea's Son;' similarly, Odysseus is styled as the 'Greek perplex'd,' i.e., tormented and plagued, by Neptune's ire. How are we to take this? Is this curious summary meant to dismiss the three greatest classical epics just as we are about to be presented with the climactic temptation and fall of man? I don't think so. The more attentively I read *Paradise Lost*, the more echoes and reverberations I hear with the three great classical epics we read together in our first two years here; I wonder if Milton's purpose isn't rather to rehabilitate heroic antecedents such as these. Sometimes his allusions are tinged with irony, as I think is the case in the passage I just cited, but irony of this sort can prompt us to reconsider and reassess what we think and feel about characters like Achilles, Odysseus, or Aeneas, without permitting us simply to discount them. Early on in the course of our NEH study group on Milton, at a moment when we had just noticed one of these epic echoes—one like "...say first what cause / Mov'd our Grand Parents in that Happy state...to fall.." (1.28-30), at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* Book One, with the *Iliad*'s "What god drove them (i.e., Agamemnon and Achilles) to fight with such a fury?"—one of my colleagues asked with a hint of exasperation, "What is he doing?—he can't just play around with things like this!" This remark struck me as being both fair and true, a rightful

insistence that poets should not be simply permitted to do whatever strikes their fancy; they ought to be held to some standard of poetic justice.

If we consider for a moment the answer to each of these epic questions—‘Apollo,’ in the case of the *Iliad*, and ‘Th’infernal Serpent’ in *Paradise Lost*—we might gain some sense of what Milton is doing. Later on in Book One of *Paradise Lost*, soon after Satan summons his defeated legions with the majestic command, “Awake, arise, or be forever fallen,” (1.330), as they gather on the plain of Hell, we learn that the names of all the fallen angels were blotted from the heavenly record after their rebellion from God, and that later, after the Fall, men came to adore “Devils...for Deities” (1.373) and gave them the names of all the “various Idols through the Heathen World.”(1.375) So, this means that Apollo, the son of Zeus and Leto, whose anger at Agamemnon for failing to honor the request by the priest Chryses for the return of his daughter prompts him to smite the Achaean armies with a fatal plague at the opening of the *Iliad*, turns out to be merely one of that nameless horde of apostate angels who appear in *Paradise Lost* in the catalogue of devils, Milton’s counterpart in *Paradise Lost* to Homer’s catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*. And, by the way, the Greek gods come last in this catalogue, far behind Moloch and Chemos and Baal and Ashtaroth, the horrible and magnificently obscene gods of the Ammonites, Moabites, and peoples of Canaan, all enemies of the Israelites and the living, invisible God of Milton’s poem. Moreover, his prolepsis in calling the fallen angels by their names as pagan deities as named and worshipped by postlapsarian humankind also contrasts dramatically with Adam’s account to Raphael in Book Eight of how, at God’s invitation to him to give all living things their names, he “...nam’d them, as they pass’d, and understood / Thir Nature...(8.352-53); the postlapsarian naming of

bad angels by the sons and daughters of Adam does not participate in the same knowledge and insight with which God endued Adam's original, innocent apprehension of the unfallen created order. I should mention here that this is only one of many such instances in *Paradise Lost*, where so often we are first given the fallen version or perspective on things, the one closest to us as readers, as children of our fallen "Grand Parents" Adam and Eve, before we are given the truer but to us remoter original. This amounts to nothing less than an epic deflation, a gigantic put-down of the gods of antiquity who figure so largely in the epics of Homer and Virgil.

But if Apollo is nothing more than some dissembling fallen angel turned false god, what of the heroes of Homer and Virgil; what of Achilles and Odysseus and Aeneas? Are they similarly debunked in the course of Milton's poem? By associating and contrasting these classical heroes with the chief figures of *Paradise Lost*, with Satan, with the Son of God, with Adam and Eve, Milton raises the same questions that are with us from our first seminar on the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or the *Aeneid*: What is a hero and what is worthy of being considered heroic? It is important to note at the outset, however, that despite the historical precedence of the ancient epics to *Paradise Lost*, it claims to tell the story that is really prior, of the first man and woman and their fall, the causes for this, and the remedy that will ultimately transform their (and our) tragedy into a divine comedy in which restoration is effected and redemption is possible. Thus, the ultimate terms of heroism here range from the transcendently and divinely heroic to the demonically evil and debased, with the possibility of a genuine human heroism newly realized that reflects knowledge of these ultimate terms as the fruit of the poet's great argument.

In the passage we just looked at, we saw that in raising and answering the question that introduces the narrative of the poem—‘what cause?... Th’ infernal serpent’—Milton introduces the character of Satan, who dominates the first books of the poem and whose implacable envy and revenge against what he calls “the Tyranny of Heav’n”(1.124) prompt him to undertake his odyssey from Hell to our newer world, either to waste it utterly with Hell fire or to possess it as an empire (2.364-66), a demonic project that mimics elements of both the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*. It is difficult in these early books not to find Satan at least somewhat attractive and sometimes immensely entertaining, in spite of the numerous cues that Milton gives to warn us about his true nature. Consider, for example, the names of Satan, beginning with the aforementioned “Infernal Serpent”, to “th’ Arch-Enemy, and thence in Heav’n call’d Satan” (1.80-81), “th’ Apostate Angel” (1.125), “th’ Arch-fiend” (1.156), “the lost Arch-Angel” (1.243), “their great Sultan” (1.348), and “Arch-Angel ruin’d” (1.593)—these all occur in Book One--and this is not an exhaustive list! Each tells us something of what Satan is and that he certainly is not good, but like Eve, it is hard for us not to be fascinated and taken in by him, perhaps because of Milton’s calculated grandiloquence. If such is meant to deter us, we might be tempted like the poet William Blake to say:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels &
God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was
A true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.⁷

More influential in our initial assessment of Satan perhaps are his own stirring words that he uses to rally the fallen angels:

⁷ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. xvii.

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield
And what is else not to be overcome?
That Glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me. (1.105-111)

His refusal to compromise or concede, his indomitable courage and enormous sense of honor and personal worth may remind us of Achilles at first, until we remember that Achilles' wrath against Agamemnon is neither immortal nor unlimited. At the height of his rage in *Iliad* 9, he tells the embassy of Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax that he

will not think of arming for bloody war again,
not *till* the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector
batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters,
slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire. (9.795-798-emphasis
mine)

Later, the climactic scene in *Iliad* 24 shows an Achilles capable of marveling at the majestic nobility of Priam, who comes to ransom the body of his fallen son Hector (567), and who spares the life of the old king despite himself when Priam inadvertently enrages him with his suggestion that the Achaean prince can enjoy the ransom just paid, when he returns to his native land (652-669). By contrast to these heroes, Satan claims to possess "a mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time"(1.253), to which he adds, in two of the most famous lines of the poem,

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. (254-255)

This *inalterable* hatred against heaven originates in the umbrage he takes at the Father's proclamation to the full company of angels that his only begotten Son, "the powerful Word" (7.208-9) through whom all things were made (6.836-38), is "*Messiah* King anointed" (5.664), an announcement that Satan finds unbearable, for he "thought himself

impair'd" (5.665) i.e., lowered in rank and esteem among the company of heaven. The epic voice tells us in the following line (666!) that Satan, "Deep malice thence conceiving and disdain," is at that moment inspired to launch his rebellion and perpetual war against heaven. After his defeat in a three day long epic battle, related in Book Six of *Paradise Lost*, and his expulsion into Hell with the rebel angels, he builds his great capital Pandemonium and resolves almost immediately to 'enlarge his honor and empire' by conquering the new world that he has just heard about.

Many readers have also noticed parallels between Satan's heroic journey to discover this new world, related through parts of the narrative of Books Two, Three, and Four, and the account that Virgil gives us of Aeneas' flight with his countrymen from Troy and his struggle to establish the new kingdom that will serve as the basis for Rome. By contrast it is significant that Satan undertakes this quest alone and as the ultimate in impious projects, one that is meant to thwart the divine will and to destroy the inhabitants of earth by fraud. When at the opening of Book Six he alights on Mt. Niphates, ready to initiate his destructive program, he pauses dramatically to consider his situation, only to find that

Horror and doubt distract
His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stir
The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more than from himself can fly
By change of place... (6.18-23)

In our Milton study group, one of my colleagues pointed out that Satan's inner tumult here, initially wordless, is reminiscent of Plutarch's description of Caesar's deliberations before he crosses the Rubicon:

...he wavered much in his mind when he considered

the greatness of the enterprise into which he was throwing himself. He checked his course and ordered a halt, while he revolved with himself, and often changed his opinion one way and the other, without speaking a word.⁸

Despite the great journey he has undertaken, Satan paradoxically finds himself trapped and confined within the limits of his fixed mind, for once at a loss for words, and as he gazes first towards Eden and then heaven, try as he might, he is unable to make a heaven out of his inner Hell. Remembering “what he was, what is, and what must be / Worse...” (4.25-26), he at last gives utterance to his inmost thoughts in a speech that begins with lines originally intended for a tragedy Milton proposed to call “Adam Unparadiz’d.”⁹ In the eighty-one lines of this soliloquy, Satan demonstrates the truth of La Rochefoucauld’s maxim that “whatever discoveries one may have made in the land of self-love, there is still a lot of uncharted territory.”¹⁰ Chronologically the first lines written for Satan in *Paradise Lost*, these lines give us a sense of how Milton originally conceived his matchless villain. Satan recognizes the enormity of his offense against “Heav’n’s matchless King,” (4.41) whom he acknowledges as his creator—contradicting his claim to the angel Abdiel later in the poem that he is “self-begot, self-rais’d—and confesses that “lifted up so high / I s’deined subjection” (49-50). This word “disdain” returns again later in the soliloquy as he considers the possibility of repentance and pardon, in order to escape the ever lower hellish deep that threatens to devour him:

O then at last relent: is there no place
Left for repentance, none for Pardon left?

⁸ Plutarch, “The Life of Caesar” from *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. John Dryden, rev. Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library) p. 874.

⁹ Edward Phillips, *The Life of Milton*, in Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp.1034-35.

¹⁰ François, duc de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes et Réflexions Diverses*. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1977), maxim 3, p. 45. (translation mine)

None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduc'd ...
(4.79-83—emphasis mine)

What is so terrible for Satan, so forbidding in this word *disdain*? Its primary meaning is to think unworthy of oneself, to despise or treat with scorn,¹¹ and Satan's sense of impairment, of his diminished status beneath both the Father and the Son of God, drives him not only to cut himself off from "Heav'n's free Love dealt equally to all"(4.68), but, as he confesses here, to seduce a third of his fellow angels from the allegiance and service they rightfully owe to God. In proposing to himself what it would mean to repent and obtain pardon, he can only imagine that his own "high thoughts" would soon prompt him "to unsay what feign'd submission swore" (4.95-96).

Like Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Satan brings himself to the very threshold of repentance but in his great pain and anguish can sustain no firm purpose of amendment. In the painful course of this long deliberation on Niphates, Satan shows what Hume later on will assert in his *Treatise*, that "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.'"¹² And like Caesar, who ultimately casts aside his misgivings to cross the Rubicon and move on Rome to pursue empire and personal power, Satan rejects hope and contrition to embrace the evil that he calls his good, to win by deceit and hold by fraud "Divided Empire with Heav'n's King" over "this new World" (4.111-14). He comes to Eden as an "arch-felon" (4.179), a terrorist whose mind is set on the destruction of the blissful, sweet, newly created world that he can appreciate but not abide. "That fixt mind / And high disdain"(1.97-98) that

¹¹ OED 1

¹² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II,3. (Oxford, Clarendon Press,1968), p. 416.

distinguish him from the outset of the poem persist through all his outward transformations: from stripling cherub to cormorant to toad and finally to “monstrous Serpent on his Belly prone / reluctant”(10.514-15) in Book Ten, the form he first takes on to deceive Eve but then finds himself stuck in when the explosion of hisses from his fallen angel followers, similarly and horribly and aptly transmogrified, greet him at the end of his triumphant return to Hell.

In his fixity and self-professed unchangeableness, Satan distinguishes himself not only from the classical heroes of antiquity, but also from Adam and Eve, and the entire company of heaven loyal to the Father, including the Son of God. We need next to consider the last of these, for in looking at the Son of God and then comparing him with Satan, we can lay out the two extremes of transcendent heroism and unsurpassed villainy, the ultimate terms of the created order.

It is important first to note that God the Father is “Omnipotent, Immutable, Immortal, Infinite, Eternal King,” “Author of all being”(3.372-74), and “invisible amidst...glorious brightness” (3.375-376); while the Son, “the radiant image of his (the Father’s) glory” (3.63) is the “Only begotten Son” (3.80), suggesting a being in essence different from the Father,¹³ a unique and mutable creature, albeit the first-born of creation, in the relation to the Father of an inferior to a superior.¹⁴ I apologize if this seems to be a needlessly abstruse digression on Milton’s anti-Trinitarianism, but it helps to explain two features of Milton’s presentation of the Council of Heaven in Book Three that most readers find strange, if not troubling.

¹³ John Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, trans. John Carey, vol.6, p. 210 from *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953-1982).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

First, the Father and the Son are depicted there as having a conversation in the presence of the loyal angels, in which the Father, prompted by the sight of Satan winging his way towards Eden, tells the Son how the desperate revenge of Satan will pervert man through guile to fall, and goes on to explain how the mitigating factor of this deception warrants the mercy and justice that He will show man after the Fall. Orthodox Christian theology about the Trinity, with its formal profession of the unity of substance attributed to Father, Son, and Spirit, as formulated in the Nicene Creed, would most likely deter the poet from presenting such an exchange, but here the Son is a creature, though the first born and highest of all creation, and he learns in the presence of the angels what is hidden in the depths of his Father's foreknowledge. If the Son were to know everything by virtue of his own consubstantiality with the Father, this celestial conversation would take on the aspect of a strange court masque with the king and the crown prince as the principal players, or of a duo recital for the benefit of the angels –and us readers, something I don't think Milton means to do here, however strange we may find this scene to be.

Second, as the sacred conversation continues, the Father explains that once man has fallen, with the vigor of his original goodness being “forfeit and enthrall'd”(3.176), justice demands that “He with his whole posterity must die” (3.209), adding

...unless for him
Some other able, and as willing, pay
The rigid satisfaction, death for death. (3.210-12)

This long exposition on the need for atonement for the sin of Adam and Eve culminates with the Father's hard, direct question addressed to the entire company of heaven:

Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love,
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem

Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save,
Dwells in all Heaven charity so dear? (3.213-16)

The silence that follows this question –“the Heav'nly Choir stood mute”(3.216)—is the most dramatic event in this scene up to this moment, until the Son of God offers himself as the proxy for disabled humanity, with the dramatic words

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 this glory next to thee
Freely put off, and for him lastly die
Well pleas'd... (3.236-40)

Notice here that Milton differentiates the “mee” of the Son’s dramatic offer by adding and extra “e” to the spelling, something he does elsewhere with the pronouns he, ye, and she, as if to simulate the emphasis Greek achieves with the accented ἔμει over the enclitic με, or by adding the particles δὴ or γάρ for additional stress; or like the use of *moi* as a stressed pronoun in French. Yet the Son’s ‘mee...mee...mee...mee’ is not the self-aggrandizing or vain-glorious egotism that we hear later from Satan, when discovered in the garden by the angel guards Ithuriel and Zephon, who do not recognize him, he asks:

Know ye not then said Satan, fill'd with scorn
Know ye not mee? ...
Not to know mee argues yourselves unknown...(4. 827-30)

Rather, the Son’s proposal is to empty himself of all that is rightfully his for the sake of mankind, which is the sacrifice of “glory...freely put off...”(3.239-40) in the incarnation, and which necessarily entails his own death, so that his emphatic *mee* is a rhetorical

measure both of the desperate condition of a fallen world and the heroic love of the Son for mortal man.¹⁵

Moreover, the Son's words here echo those found in an incident related in Book Nine of the *Aeneid*, during the bitter war that erupts between Aeneas and the Rutulian prince Turnus for the hand of Lavinia, after the Trojans have landed in Italy.¹⁶ Two Trojan soldiers, Nisus and Euryalus, are a devoted pair of lovers who set out from the besieged Trojan camp through enemy lines to gain help from Aeneas, who is away. Nisus, the older, cannier veteran of the two, hears the cry of Euryalus his innocent, spirited cohort, as he is caught by a Rutulian patrol after impulsively wrecking havoc in their camp. Nisus, in trying to deflect the avenging wrath of the Rutulians from his young comrade onto himself, cries out:

On me—on me—here am I who did the deed—on me turn
your steel, O Rutulians! Mine is all the guilt; he neither dared nor
could have done aught; this heaven be witness and the all-seeing
stars! He but loved his hapless friend too well!
(*Aeneid* 9. 427-430)

This cry of 'on me, on me...mine is all the guilt' sets the poetic precedent for the Son's cry during the Council of Heaven, but there is a sense in which Milton, though writing his poem seventeen hundred years later, scoops Virgil by having the Son offer himself for all of fallen humanity shortly after the creation of the world. It can be seen, too, that the Son's magnanimity combines elements of the experience, generosity, and selflessness of Nisus with the innocence and beauty of Euryalus, providing a standard of heroism that is

¹⁵ Stanley Fish calls this "the poem's first truly heroic act." Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin*. (Cambridge; Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), p.86.

¹⁶ Alastair Fowler also points out this echo in a note to 3.236-38, *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1968), p. 574. Hereafter cited as Fowler.

at once poignant and extraordinary, perhaps we might say transcendent. Whatever the case, the Son at this point emerges as the outstanding hero of the poem.

In reading *Paradise Lost* for seminar in junior year, we completely skip over Book Six and nearly all of Book Seven, the very heart and center of Milton's poem, where Raphael recounts for Adam and Eve both the Son's *aristeia* in the Battle of Heaven against Satan, the central epic episode of the poem, and his work as the "Omnific Word"(7.217), effecting the will of the Father in Creation. We should note here that the exact center of the poem, whether we take the ten-book division of First Edition of 1671 or the twelve-book division of the Second Edition of 1674, with its additional fourteen lines, is placed at the climax of the Battle of Heaven in Book Six, when the Son appears in the "Chariot of Paternal Deity"(6.750) and single-handedly defeats the Satan and his cohort of fallen angels, who throw themselves headlong into the bottomless pit.¹⁷ It should be needless to say that in a work of such length and complexity, it is doubtlessly significant, the result of great art and deliberateness, that the center is placed here.

What then of Adam and Eve? We meet them before the Fall, in Book Four—

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native Honor clad
In naked Majesty...Lords of all,
 ...in their looks Divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone (4.288-292)

Despite their common heroic bearing and natural dominion over the garden, they are not equal:

For contemplation hee and valor form'd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
Hee for God only, shee for God in him (4.297-299)

¹⁷ The central line in Edition I occurs at 6.761; in Edition II at 6.766. *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442; cp. Fowler, 441-442

‘Valor’ suggests the sort of strength and bravery that makes one equal to conflict and battle, while ‘softness,’ at least before the Fall, is simply meant to imply mildness and gentleness,¹⁸ rather than weakness or timidity.¹⁹ As in Heaven with the Father, the Son and the angels, so too in Paradise there is a hierarchical order, here expressed in Adam’s “gentle sway”(4.309) and Eve’s “coy—i.e., quiet, modest²⁰—submission”(4.311). In the first words we hear between the two of them, Adam marvels that they should enjoy freely such unmerited happiness, while following the “delightful task”(4.437) of tending the garden and obeying God’s “easy charge”(4.421) –to refrain from eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Eve seconds this and claims herself the happier of the two in enjoying Adam’s preëminence, something we tend to forget—or don’t want to believe—in the course of her long account of first awakening on the day of her creation. Is it the case that such perfect harmony between the sexes, though without equality, is something that can only be imagined by a poet who claims to be the beneficiary of extraordinary inspiration?

If we grant this for the sake of the poem, we might be tempted to think that the created world of Eden is simple and perfect and static, but this turns out not to be the case. The angel Raphael, sent by the Father to warn Adam of the danger that Satan presents to his happiness, first shares a meal with Adam and Eve, and in answer to Adam’s question about how an angel can partake of earthly fruit, gives an account of a dynamic created order in which corporal nutriments, endowed with various forms, are equally capable of nourishing different forms of life, which all having first proceeded

¹⁸ OED 2

¹⁹ OED 3

²⁰ OED 1,2.

from the Almighty are meant by degrees and over time to return to him. The importance of this for Adam and Eve is made explicit when Raphael continues:

And from these corporal nutriments perhaps
Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,
Improv'd by tract of time, and wing'd ascend
Ethereal, as *wee*... (5.496-499—emphasis mine))

Happiness takes time, may increase over time—indeed is meant to—yet the metaphysical and moral dynamics of the created order are such that each stage is capable of only so much and no more—Leibniz would say only so much at any given moment is compossible. This is what it means to eat right. Note, too, that the ascent is to the *angelic* order. Raphael then tells Adam and Eve that in time they

...may at choice
Here or in Heav'nly Paradises dwell;
If ye be found obedient, and retain
Unalterably firm his love entire
Whose progeny you are. (5.499-503)

In this first of six warnings that Raphael gives Adam in the course of their long conversation,²¹ he sets out clearly what is at stake in obedience and disobedience, suggesting the dynamic of growth that presupposes both a hierarchy of perfection and the continuity of unchangeable love. Later, in Book Seven, Raphael relates to Adam and Eve the conversation that the Father has with the Son just prior to creation. After characterizing Satan and the fallen angels as “Self-lost”(7.154)—a divine correction of Satan’s earlier claim to be “self-begot, self-rai’s’d ” (5.860), he proposes to create

Another World, out of one man a Race
Of men innumerable, there to dwell,
Not here, till by degrees of merit rais’d
They open to themselves at length the way
Up hither, under long obedience tri’d,

²¹ The others are found at 6.897-912; 7.542-547; 8.166-178; 8.561-594; 8.633-643.

And Earth be chang'd to Heav'n and Heav'n to Earth,
One Kingdom, Joy and Union without end. (7.155-161)

In his final angelic admonition, the most succinct and the one given to Adam alone,

Raphael says:

Be strong, live happy, and love, but first of all
Him whom to love is to obey, and keep
His great command; take heed lest Passion sway
Thy judgment to do aught, which else free Will
Would not admit; thine and of all thy Sons
The weal or woe in thee is plac't; beware.
I in thy persevering shall rejoice,
And all the Blest: stand fast; to stand or fall
Free in thine own Arbitrement it lies.
Perfet within, no outward aid require;
And all temptation to transgress repel. (8. 633-643)

'Arbitrement' is the capacity to decide for oneself; in a word, free choice.²² The warning ends with two imperatives: require, i.e., ask or demand as a right,²³ no outward help; and resist any enticement to break the law set down. We can only infer from this that Adam and Eve are fully capable, self-sufficient, and perfect, so far as repelling any temptation to break the "sole command"(7.47) is concerned. We know even before we reach it that Eve and Adam will both fail the "trial...unsought"(9.366) that Adam realizes will come, indeed must come, and of which he warns Eve as she leaves him alone, in Book Nine.

Just as Homer displays Achilles in single combat against Hector and Virgil presents Aeneas alone against Turnus, Milton, in the second great epic episode of the poem, presents Eve as protagonist alone against Satan, now incarnate in a "spirited sly snake"(9.613), endowed with speech, intent on her ruin. After Eve recovers from her amazement at hearing "Language pronounc't / By Tongue of Brute"(9.553-4), she asks

²² OED 1

²³ OED II.5

the serpent how he became capable of speech, and he replies vaguely but enticingly, attributing his “strange alteration”(9.599) to eating the “fair Apples”(9.585) he found after coming by chance upon a “goodly Tree”(9.576) in the garden. She then follows him to the Tree of Knowledge, which she immediately recognizes as the one forbidden, telling the serpent that it is neither to be eaten nor touched, under pain of death. In reply Satan takes on the role of advocate for cosmic justice and human entitlement, like “some orator renowned / In *Athens* or free *Rome*” (9.670-71), and in what is to be his last speech in Paradise, he rises to an eloquence that appears to provide incontrovertible proof of the native virtue of the interdicted fruit, raising formidable arguments against its ban and for its wholesomeness.²⁴ The most compelling of these is based upon the simple specious proportion stating that—in eating the fruit—as **change from serpent : change into serpent with *logos* :: change from man : change into god.**²⁵ We know that this is specious from Raphael’s discourse earlier and from our reading of Genesis—and also from our status as the hapless descendants of Eve, as ‘the fruit of that forbidden tree.’ The true proportion expressing the change that has taken place in Satan and is about to take place in Adam and Eve is:

archangel : archangel ruin’d :: man : fallen man.

Eve knows the first ratio of this second proportion from Raphael, but she believes she sees the evidence for the first ratio of the first transformation before her eyes and hears it in her ears. But she ignores the contradiction between the ultimate term of the first, satanic proportion—‘*god*’—and Raphael’s earlier discourse about the possibility of

²⁴ Barbara Lewalski, in *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) note 43, p.357, states that the false analogies that Satan leads Eve to make are “evidently original with Milton.”

²⁵ cp. Fowler, note ix.710-12, p. 898.

gradual, ordered ascent to the *angelic* order. Besides, it is noon, she is hungry, and the savory smell of the fruit beckons, so she pauses to deliberate, her private musings ultimately giving approval to what, for her, the serpent has proved. She first plucks the fruit “through expectation high / of knowledge”(9.789-90), and then, serpent-like, she greedily engorges it a far remove from her earlier rural repast (9.4) with Adam and Raphael, and she forgets Raphael’s discourse on the natural and gradual improvement to be gained by eating in accord with the divine command.

The effects of the fruit on Eve are immediately apparent: she worships the tree, praises experience as “Best guide”(9.807), speculates about whether God has seen what she has done, and then deliberates over whether or not to “keep the odds of Knowledge”(9.820) to herself by not sharing the fruit with Adam, to draw his love the more to her, now his equal, or better yet, his superior. Experience is not such an effective teacher, or so it seems. Eve’s first impulse here is not to imitate her own experience of the serpent’s apparent generosity. But second thoughts cause her to worry that if God *has* seen her, she will die alone, and Adam might re-wed, happily, a second Eve; fearful, jealous thoughts that prompt her to decide firmly that “Adam shall share...in bliss or woe.”(9.831) The epic battle here lost by Eve is not one of “fabl’d Knights / In Battles feign’d”(9.30-31) but one of words and will, and natural grace disregarded and abandoned.

When Adam finds her at the Tree of Knowledge, Eve recounts what has happened but adds the lie that she did it all “chiefly” for him, and now she bids him to eat “Lest ...different degree / disjoin us”(9.883-84). Adam’s inward musings, like Eve’s on the cusp of her Fall, show the paradoxical character of his decision:

...how hast thou yielded to transgress
The strict forbiddance, how to violate
The sacred Fruit forbidd'n! some cursed fraud
Of Enemy hath beguil'd thee, yet unknown, (9.902-905)

Unlike Eve, however, Adam is not deluded by the seemingly miraculous transformation of the serpent, but just as he earlier gave irrefragable arguments for why they should not separate before, only to let Eve go off, he now abruptly adds:

And mee with thee hath ruin'd, for with thee
Certain my resolution is to Die;
How can I live without thee...? (9.907-909)

Another Eve could never repair the loss of the one who stands before him—or so he imagines— and “The Link of Nature”(9.914) that draws him to her also commands his inward assent, even as he hails her as “advent'rous Eve” (9.921). Well, what else might he do? He might recollect something he heard from Raphael. Earlier, when Raphael gave Adam and Eve the account of the Fall of the rebellious angels, he told them of the “dreadless Angel” (6.1) Abdiel, who in his efforts to dissuade Satan from his disastrous course urged him to “hast'n to appease / Th'incensed Father, and th'incensed Son, / while pardon may be found in time besought.”(5.846-48) Adam no more recalls this exemplary advice than Aeneas remembers his duty to the gods and his Trojan countrymen while trysting with Dido during the royal hunt and storm outside of Carthage,²⁶ or Paris his combat oath when he beds down with Helen while Menelaus ranges the battlefield before Troy.²⁷ As Adam eats the fruit in “This happy trial of...Love” (9.975), Eve joins him, repeating her “former trespass” (9.1006), and the two complete together “the mortal Sin / Original” (9.1003-4) in a kind of idolatrous, sacramental meal. The force of the fruit

²⁶ *Aeneid* 4.129-172.

²⁷ *Iliad* 3.437-454

quickly inflames carnal desire in them both, and they consummate the Fall with a gross coupling that has aspects of both rape and meretricious seduction; this “glorious trial of exceeding Love”(9.961), so hailed by Eve, culminates with the transient ‘link of lust,’ sealing their disobedience with sex as a second pagan sacrament. They lapse into a restless sleep and awaken to guilt shame, and estrangement that leads them to mutual recrimination, “neither self-condemning”(9.1188). Each is now *isolated* and *alone*, though together, in Paradise.

Later, after the Son is dispatched from heaven by the Father to apprise Adam and Eve of the judgment against them and of the mysterious promise of the seed,²⁸ thus tempering Justice with mercy,²⁹ Adam, now alone, laments what he can only see as “the end of this new glorious World”(9.721). With its one hundred twenty-four lines it is the longest and darkest soliloquy of the entire poem, wherein Adam, at the prospect of all future generations cursing him, wishes for death and submits to the justice of his punishment. In the end he acknowledges that all his reasonings

...lead me still
But to my own conviction: first and last
On mee, mee only, as the source and spring
Of all corruption, all the blame lights due;
So might the wrath. Fond wish! Couldst thou support
That burden heavier than the Earth to bear,
Than all the world much heavier, though divided
With that bad Woman (9.830-837)

Recall the words of Nisus and the Son that we considered earlier, words of deep love and selfless heroism; it is difficult not to hear the stressed accusatives of Adam’s words, in their despair at his impotence and in his contempt for Eve, as the

²⁸ *Paradise Lost* 10.179-181)

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

dark inverse of those antecedents. When Eve approaches him, he upbraids her for being as false and hateful as the serpent. For her part, in profoundly moving, lyrical lines, she professes her love for Adam and begs for forgiveness with words that resonate with the promise of hope and restoration offered earlier by the Son:

On me exercise not
Thy hatred for this misery befall'n
On me already lost, mee than thyself
More miserable; both have sinn'd, but thou
Against God only, I against God and thee,
And to the place of judgment will return,
There with my cries importune Heaven, that all
The sentence from thy head remov'd may light
On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe,
Mee mee only just object of his ire. (10. 927-936)

Eve, in acknowledging her sin and pleading for Adam's forgiveness, first reaffirms the order established from the beginning of 'Adam for God and she for God in him,' the created order that has been fractured by their sin. Then, perhaps remembering Abdiel's injunction to 'hast'n to appease / Th'incensed Father, and th'incensed Son,' she resolves to go alone to the place where they both have received the divine judgment, to implore the divine mercy that Adam cannot even imagine, overwhelmed as he is by his hellishly dark vision of divine justice. In words that most nearly echo words of the Son to his the Father,³⁰ she offers to take upon herself the entire burden of guilt that Adam despairs even the two of them together can sustain. Her final words 'Mee mee only just object of his ire' correspond most nearly to the Son's as he says to the Father, "...life for life / I offer, on mee let thine anger fall." (3.236-237) Yet, while this offer is utterly, heroically

³⁰ cf. Joseph Summers, *The Muse's Method: an Introduction to Paradise Lost* (Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1981), pp. 179-80. Summers rightly contrasts the Son's and Eve's use of the stressed accusative "mee" with Satan's use of "I," though we have seen that Satan uses the "mee" -to very different purpose—as well.

generous, it stems from but one impulse among a host of conflicting emotions that Eve feels. Eve's heroism here is a nascent, fallen heroism.

It nevertheless has its effect: Adam is moved slowly to relent in his anger and first advises Eve to bear her own punishment first, but he then imitates her generosity in wishing that all might fall upon himself, finally suggesting that their proper task is to "strive / In offices of Love "(9.959-60) to lighten each other's burden of woe. Eve next proposes desperate measures—an end to sexual love between them, to render them childless, and joint suicide as a form of euthanasia—but Adam, perhaps reminded by Eve's earlier selfless impulse of the Son's promise that her seed will bruise the serpent's head, now urges what she had just before, that they both return to the place of judgment humbly to confess their faults in deepest sorrow, "with tears / Watering the ground." (10.1101-1102)

Significantly, the poet does not give us their words, but as Book Eleven opens, the prayers of Adam and Eve are received in heaven, where the Son renews his pledge to serve as advocate, and the Father dispatches the angel Michael with a cohort of cherubim to "send them forth, though sorrowing, yet in peace." (11.117) To this end, the remaining two books of the poem are devoted to Michael's education of Adam, through a series of visions and lecture/ narratives in which he is shown the nature of death and the ultimate victory of the promised seed. There is not time enough now to consider the lengthy course that Michael gives Adam before the expulsion from the Garden of Eden; let it suffice here to notice Adam's response to what he learns:

Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,
And love with fear the only God, to walk
As in his presence, ever to observe
His providence, and on him sole depend,

Merciful over all his works, with good
Still overcoming evil, and by small
Accomplishing great things, by things deem'd weak
Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise
By simply meek; that suffering for Truth's sake
Is fortitude to highest victory...(12.561-570)

With these final words, Adam seconds those of the poet earlier in his proem to Book Nine, where Milton holds up what he claims is “the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom”(9.31-32) as the proper subject for heroic song. Courage, bravery, and fortitude are what epic bards traditionally sing about; in Greek poetry, *tharsos* ((courage, confidence, boldness) and *thrasos* (courage, confidence, rashness), with *andreia* (manliness, strength, bravery) designating the word for this virtue that Plato and Aristotle use; in Latin poetry, *virtus* (manliness, virtue, bravery, courage) and *fortitudo* (physical strength, moral bravery, courage), in all three languages one of the four cardinal virtues. We saw the paradigm instance of this in *Paradise Lost* before, at the Council of Heaven, in the Son's volunteering to empty himself in order to redeem man, by taking on human flesh with all of its vulnerability and mortality after the fall, becoming small in order to accomplish great things. Adam has come to understand that obedience may ultimately demand the greater fortitude, from the heroic examples of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and preëminently, Messiah, all presented by Michael in his account of the career of the seed, steadfast despite the reversals brought about by Cain, Tubal-Cain, Nimrod, Pharaoh, and Rome—and ultimately by Satan, Sin and Death.

Michael, in his final reply and last words in the poem, calls this “the sum / Of wisdom”(12.575-76), higher than all earthly knowledge of the stars and “all Nature’s works” (12.578), as if to say with Pascal:³¹

Knowledge of physical science will not console me for ignorance
Of morality in time of affliction, but knowledge of morality
Will always console me for ignorance of physical science. (23/67)

It is not enough, however, merely to have such wisdom and knowledge;

Michael continues:

...only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,
By name to come call’d Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far. (12. 581-87)

‘Answerable,’ i.e., responsible, knowledge shows itself in action, in deeds, as the fruit of this highest wisdom that Michael recognizes in Adam. Michael’s words here follow almost exactly those found in 2 Peter 1. 5-8, except for the final verse, where Peter writes:

For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that
ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord
Jesus Christ. (KJV)

Michael instead gently reminds Adam that he must leave Paradise the place, taking it with him as an inner state, as if to suggest that the fruitfulness of the Garden of Eden can be extended to wherever wisdom and the greater fortitude of acts of charity consonant with it are done. We can thus see how Michael’s final words are equivalent to this verse from 2 Peter, as adapted to the circumstances of Adam, who has just been brought from

³¹ Pascal’s *Pensees*, trans. Alban J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin Books, 1984) p. 36.

despair at the loss of Paradise, a despair that prompted Eve to propose a deliberately 'unfruitful' barrenness, to the prospect of an even greater happiness that comes with possession of "a paradise within." (12.586)

And what of Eve? She has slept through all of this, Michael having "drencht" her eyes with a soporific before his conversation with Adam began. At Michael's urging, Adam hastens to the bower where Eve has been sleeping, only to find her already awake, and advised by her dreams of all that he has learned, "For God is also in sleep." (12.611) Eve is given the last words quoted, as beautiful and lyrical as any in the poem:

...but now lead on;	chiasmus
In mee is no delay; with thee to go,	go stay
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay	\ /
Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee	stay go
Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,	
Who for my willful crime art banisht hence.	
This further consolation yet secure	
I carry hence; though all by mee is lost,	
Such favor I unworthy am voutsaf't,	
By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore. (12. 614-623)	

Eve at once accepts and approves their banishment from Eden, and urges Adam to lead the way, thereby reversing their roles during the catastrophe of the Fall. The flowing iambic motion of "In mee is no delay; with thee to go," interrupted by the affectingly simple chiasmus that follows, with its stop-start alternation of "go ...stay...stay...go," convey both a sense of the restored order she professes in her relation to Adam and the incipient joy that she feels in the newly discovered "paradise within." Her words also both echo and anticipate the words of Ruth the Moabite woman to her Hebrew mother-in-law Naomi as they set out from the security of Moab to return to Judah:

...whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will
lodge...Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried...
(*Ruth* 1.16-17)

Eve's final lines indicate that she is at once "though sorrowing, yet in peace"(11.117), and her final two stressed accusative 'mees' reverberate with her earlier offer to take full responsibility for the Fall and with the Son's offer to save mankind, to the extent that the two almost seem here to merge in her final line 'By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore.'

This is the last spoken line of the poem, but it is not the last that we hear. The final five lines, with their deeply touching image of Adam and Eve as they depart Paradise, show that they are now, again, together alone:

Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide;
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow
Through Eden took thir solitary way.

This penultimate word 'solitary' seems to be in tension with the 'hand in hand' of the line before, just as 'wand'ring' in that line is with 'place of rest' in the line before it. These tensions may strike us as both troubling and true, the very crux of the matter in an 'argument...more heroic.'

Thank you for your fortitude and attention.