

# THE EDUCATION OF EVE:

## Milton

by Jo-Anne Isaak

Milton considers a "complete and generous Education" to be "that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully and magnanimously all his offices." Applying this dictum to Eve's case, let us first examine what constitutes Eve's offices and then attempt to assess whether the education she receives fits her to perform them.

We are told in Book Seven that man was created

. . . to adore  
And worship God Supreme,  
who made him chief  
Of all his works.(2)

In his temptation scenes (The Lady in Comus, Eve in Paradise Lost, Christ in Paradise Regained and Samson in Samson Agonistes) Milton focuses upon a problem that had become a Christian preoccupation--the relationship between knowledge and virtue. In each case the equation is clear: those who are knowledgeable are able to resist temptation, while those who are not, succumb. In Paradise Lost Milton takes pains to show that God is not remiss in equipping Adam with the valuable moral stay of an education. The education of Adam has received a great deal of critical attention,(1) but what of Eve's education? Critics have ignored this question, apparently assuming that Eve receives more or less the same education as Adam. In Of Education

This applies to woman as well, but the raison d'être for Eve is delineated more fully in Book Eight when Adam "presumed" upon God in asking for a companion. The ensuing debate takes up almost one hundred lines, forcing us to ask the point of this highly improbable exchange between man and God. We are told, at the close of the debate, that God "knew it not good for man to be alone" (VIII, 445), and the debate ends when God answers:

Thus far to try thee, Adam, I was  
pleased,  
And find thee knowing not of  
beasts alone,  
Which thou has rightly named, but  
of thyself. . . .

(VIII, 437-439)

This statement accomplishes two ends simultaneously: it gives God's sanction to Adam's argument for the creation of woman and it indicates succinctly the text of Adam's speech--self-knowledge. Adam recognizes that he, in contrast to God, is not self-sufficient, immutable or perfect. This deficiency, Adam explains, is "the cause of his desire" for a companion. He hopes "By conversation with his like to help/Or solace his defects." (VIII, 418-419). Further, because man is defective in the single state, procreation is necessary.

. . . Man by number is to manifest  
 His single imperfection, and beget  
 Like of his like, his Image multiplied,  
 In unity defective, which requires  
 Collateral love, and dearest  
 amitie.

(VIII, 422-426)

For insight into the significance of the argument Adam propounds for the creation of woman one can turn to the Neoplatonic theory of love elaborated by Ficino in his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*: "God alone, in whom nothing is lacking, above whom there is nothing, remains satisfied in Himself and sufficient in Himself." (159) (3) Man, lacking this self-sufficiency, must extend himself. He has within himself the divine element of Beauty, which "is a kind of force or light, shining from God through everything." (140)

Man "worships and adores the human beauty as an image of the divine beauty [and] desires to create another form like this." (143) "Generation, which is a divine function, is carried out exactly and easily in that which is beautiful, and the contrary in the opposite." (203) Thus, by a process of natural selection the divine attributes of mankind are amplified. But Adam's request of God is not only for the means of propagation; he desires "collateral love"--a principal means by which, according to Ficino, man gains knowledge of God: "The passion of a lover is not quenched by the mere touch or sight of a body, for it does not desire this or that body, but desires the splendor of the divine light shining through bodies, and is amazed and awed by it." (140) Through Love, "God draws the world to Himself . . . there is one continuous attraction, beginning with God, going to the world and ending at last in God, an attraction which returns to the same place whence it began as though in a kind of circle." (134) Adam instinctively realizes that in the experience of human love and in the desire to procreate lie the way to transcendence. For love "leads up to heav'n, is both the way and guide." (VIII, 613) Later Raphael confirms Adam's realization and tells him further that "Love refines/The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat/In reason, and is judicious, is the scale/By which to heavenly Love thou maist ascend." (VIII, 589-592)

All this indicates the complex, vital role Eve is created to fulfill; and she is, God tells Adam, made to order:

What next I bring shall please thee, be assured,  
Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self,  
Thy wish exactly to thy heart's desire.

(VIII, 449-451)

What then, you may well ask, "wants/ In female sex?" (IX, 821-822) The answer, suggested many times in the epic and recognized by Eve herself, is knowledge. Until Book Ten, Eve knows little about the purpose of her existence, almost nothing of her environment and is confused about her relation to Adam.

We realize how ignorant Eve is by comparing her with Adam. The disparity between the two in this respect is most overt in the passages which describe their first awakening. Eve is described as acting initially "with unexperienced thought." (IV, 457) Her senses are operative but her intellect lags. Her attention is attracted by the murmuring sound of water nearby. She sees the water's reflection of her image but is incapable of recognizing it as such. As she tells us, she would have "pined with vain desire" (IV, 466) for the image in the water had not a voice explained to her that she was looking at herself and then led her to Adam, the proper object of her devotion. A

number of critics have observed that Milton, in this passage, is suggesting the tragic flaw of self-love in Eve. (4) I believe Milton is also suggesting another incipient tragic flaw--ignorance. If we were given only the account of Eve's awakening we would perhaps find nothing amiss in a newly created being making this type of error. But when we are given the account of Adam's awakening, we realize, by comparison, Eve's ignorance. After his initial amazement at his own creation and observation of the world around him, Adam is able to give names to its components and deduces that the creation implies a creator. But he does not stop there; he is immediately worshipful: he prays that he may be told how to know his creator so that he may adore him. In short, the newly conscious Adam is highly evolved intellectually and spiritually.

The account of Eve's awakening also reveals how easily she may be instructed and by what means. When Eve first meets Adam, she rejects him, preferring the image in the pond. But after Adam delivers his very moving plea for her love (IV, 481-488), she realizes "How beauty is excelled by manly grace/And wisdom, which alone is truly fair." (IV, 490-491)

In Book Four (297-298) we are told explicitly that Eve was not intended to be as intellectually acute as Adam. Aware of Adam's superiority in this

area, she considers herself fortunate to have Adam as a companion:

. . . I chiefly who enjoy  
So far the happier lot, enjoying thee  
Pre-eminent by so much odds,  
while thou  
Like consort to thyself canst  
nowhere find.

(IV, 445-448)

The last line of this speech might be seen as commendable modesty on Eve's part but it might also indicate that she is ill-informed about the nature and importance of her role in the relationship.

Adam, from the moment of his creation, is continually being educated. From no less an instructor than God he learns about the world he is to live in, his dominion in that world, his role as first father, the work he is to do, the interdiction against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and the consequences of that trespass. At her creation Eve is informed only that she is to love Adam and bear "multitudes." (IV, 474) For the most part she is to receive her education from Adam and, as has been indicated, for very good reasons: he is intellectually superior, is better educated and has had the benefit of a lengthy discussion with God. Eve is grateful to have Adam as her guide. But there are times when his guidance would seem to be inadequate. It is perhaps nowhere more so than when she turns to him for an explanation of her

dream--a dream in which Satan tempts her with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam has been prepared for this occasion by his own dream of tempting fruit, a dream followed by God's warning against the Forbidden Tree. Instead of recounting his own experience and God's message Adam launches into a long digression about the nature of Fancy and Reason, ending by assuring Eve that she is still sinless. At this Eve cries, fearing to have offended. On this occasion Adam seems to be singularly unaware of the issue. Eve is not asking him to ascertain whether she is sinless nor does she feel, at least originally, that she has offended anyone. She is troubled and is asking for an explanation.

Directly after Eve's dream God sends Raphael to visit Eden. Her dream is the occasion of the visitation; God says to Raphael:

. . . Thou hear'st what stir on earth  
Satan, from hell scraped through  
the darksome gulf,  
Hath raised in Paradise, and how  
disturbed  
This night the human pair . . . .  
(V, 224-227)

Actually, Satan does not disturb the human pair--Adam, we are told, had a good night's sleep. Nevertheless, Raphael is instructed to "converse with Adam" and to

Tell him withal  
His danger, and from whom; what  
enemy

Late fall'n himself from heav'n,  
is plotting now  
The fall of others from like  
state of bliss. . . .

(V, 238-241)

When Raphael arrives in Eden, he informs Adam as he has been instructed and tells him "whatever else may avail him to know." Raphael's instruction takes up five books of Paradise Lost. How much of this information Eve receives we are not sure. We know that for the first part of Raphael's visit she is busy preparing dinner, her mind "on hospitable thoughts intend." (V, 322) We are not informed of her leaving the company until Book Eight; yet as early as Book Six, when Raphael delivers God's caution about Satan, he concludes by instructing Adam to "warn/Thy weaker" (VI, 908-909), implying that Eve is not present to hear this important message. Douglas Bush's comment on Eve's early departure is most appropriate:

It is unfortunate that at this point Eve, who as the first sinner was especially in need of counsel, should have obeyed feminine decorum and have left the gentlemen to their high masculine converse; her expectation of receiving a later digest from her husband was not adequately fulfilled. (5)

For Adam, talking to the Angel is like being in heaven (VIII, 210); and he does everything he can to prolong the visit. But of Eve we are told, "Her husband the relater she preferred/ Before the Angel." (VIII, 52-53) We

are reminded by this of other statements, such as "God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more/Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (IV, 637-638) and "He for God only, she for God in him." (IV, 299) Eve, it seems, is to have no direct relationship with God; she is to know God only through an intermediary--Adam. It is incongruous that Milton, as a Protestant, should establish a hierarchy wherein each individual does not have a direct relation with God. For those seeking misogynist tendencies in Milton this is fertile ground. For the present purposes it is enough to note that Eve is to receive her religious instruction from Adam and that Adam is somewhat negligent in his duty. Before they separate (this is just before the fall), Adam does warn Eve of the "malicious foe" seeking to harm them and Eve mentions that she "overheard . . . the parting angel" (IX, 276), but we still feel she has received only cursory information. Her ignorance is apparent in their conversation. From a purely practical standpoint, Eve's suggestion that she and Adam work apart seems reasonable enough; but it reveals her mistaken conception of the pair's intended function: their role is not so much to maintain the garden as to sustain each other. Adam is aware of God's intentions and tells Eve:

. . . not so strictly hath our  
Lord imposed  
Labor, as to debar us when we need  
Refreshment, whether food, or talk  
between,



Sand Nelson 77

Food of the mind, or this sweet  
intercourse  
Of looks and smiles . . . .

(IX, 235-239)

Moreover, he knows they are safest in  
one another's company. For the foe,  
he says,

Watches, no doubt, with greedy  
hope to find  
His wish and best advantage, us  
asunder,  
Hopeless to circumvent us joined,  
where each  
To other speedy aid might lend at  
need.

(IX, 257-260)

Adam further enjoins her to  
. . . leave not the faithful side  
That gave Thee being, still  
shades thee and protects  
The wife, where danger or dis-  
honor lurks.  
Safest and seemliest by her hus-  
band stays,  
Who guards her, or with her the  
worst endures.

(IX, 265-269)

Not understanding the wisdom of this  
arrangement, Eve resents the idea that  
she is not self-sufficient. Adam then  
points out that he also is not self-  
sufficient and that he is aided by her  
presence:

I from the influence of thy looks  
receive  
Access in every virtue, in thy  
sight  
More wise, more watchful, stronger,  
if need were

Of outward strength . . . .  
(IX, 309-312)

Eve's reply reflects a basic confusion  
concerning their state. Her response  
to the concept of their mutually de-  
pendent role is that it is a limitation  
of their freedom and happiness. She  
contends that it would suggest an error  
on the part of the "Maker wise" (IX,  
338) if He did not create them secure  
"single or combined." (IX, 339) If for  
a moment we stop viewing Eve as per-  
verse and willful and listen to what  
she is saying, we realize that she be-  
lieves in the logic of the argument  
she is propounding and so would we had  
we not been given further information.  
Adam ends the discussion with those  
rash words:

. . . if thou think trial un-  
sought may find  
Us both securer than thus warned  
thou seem'st  
Go . . . .

(IX, 370-372)

He does not believe they are better off  
apart; he knew better the day he was  
created. He is allowing Eve to exer-  
cise her own judgement. But he does  
so at a time when he should have  
realized from their conversation how  
woefully unprepared Eve is to make such  
a decision. It is Adam's job to pre-  
pare her and clearly he has not done  
so. Satan's exclamation at finding Eve  
"Thus early, thus alone" (IX, 457) may  
refer to the fact that she is prema-  
turely alone in the sense of her edu-  
cational development.

It is, of course, in the temptation scene itself that Eve's lack of adequate instruction becomes most apparent. After turning "at length/ The eye of Eve to mark his play" (IX, 527-528), Satan speaks, flattering her extravagantly. She innocently assumes the serpent is being "friendly" and is interested to hear "tongue of brute" uttering "human sense." (IX, 554) This capacity of the serpent's is a miracle, she feels, and she is understandably eager to hear it repeated:

Redouble then this miracle, and say,  
How cam'st thou speakable of mute,  
and how  
To me so friendly grown above the rest  
Of brutal kind, that daily are in sight?  
Say, for such wonder claims attention due.

(IX, 562-566)

For Eve, the serpent's unexpected articulateness is a "wonder." But wonders enough have been crowded into her short life and this latest example is less exceptional than it might seem. There is even the implication that she should not have been so impressed by the reptile's speech. We recall that in Book Eight, God asks, after admonishing Adam for claiming that he is alone:

What call'st thou solitude? Is not the earth  
With various living creatures,  
and the air  
Replenished, and all these at thy command

To come and play before thee?  
Know'st thou not  
Their language and their ways?  
They also know,  
And reason not contemptibly

. . . .

(VIII, 369-374) (6)

Eve's ignorance of the language of beasts may be another indication of her general ignorance. Her wonder at the serpent's ability to speak has left an opening for persuasion and it is through this opening that Satan is able to proceed. Samuel Johnson's notion that "wonder is a pause of reason" and that "all wonder is the effect of novelty upon ignorance" is particularly apt in this instance.

By far the most important passage in what Satan goes on to tell Eve about his experience is that in which he describes the intellectual powers the fruit confers:

Thenceforth to speculations, high or deep  
I turned my thoughts, and with capacious mind  
Considered all things visible in heav'n,  
Or earth, or middle, all things fair and good.

(IX, 602-605)

We see at once how impressed she must be by Satan's report. An idea is planted in Eve's mind that she is being offered an opportunity to improve herself. As Marjorie Nicolson suggests, "From one point of view, it may be a sin to wish to rise higher than one is; from another, it seems not only a

natural human desire but an enviable one."(7) It was not considered a sin when Adam, on the day of his creation, asks for the means to rise higher than his allotted station. It is only the means Eve chooses that is at fault and it is conceivable that she is unaware of the proper channel for improvement. Her major reason for wishing to improve herself is that she hopes to become a better companion for Adam, "The more to draw his love." (IX, 822) She would have done well to listen to Raphael discuss the profits of self-esteem. (VIII, 571-572) The fault here lies in the fact that she does not realize herself to be Adam's perfect companion. Satan's words work upon "our credulous mother" (IX, 644) and we realize how vulnerable she is as that bit of knowledge she possesses becomes more and more confused. Eve in her naiveté is, Marjorie Nicolson points out, "quite unlike that early Lady who was more than a match for Comus."(8) Eve is far more "unwary" (IX, 614) and uneducated. The analogy of Satan to a city dweller and Eve to a country maid is very appropriate in the temptation scene: Eve is "beguiled." (X, 162)

In his portrayal of the first woman Milton has taken pains to show that she is not innately evil, vain or conniving. This depiction of Eve is perhaps a conscious rebuttal of St. Paul's simplistic view: "Adam was not deceived," the apostle writes "but the woman being deceived was in the

transgression." (I. Tim. ii.14) The reasonableness of this statement eludes me and it seems to have eluded Milton. Surely one who knowingly commits a sinful act is more culpable than one who is "beguiled." Adam is "Against his better knowledge, not deceived,/But fondly overcome with female charm." (IX, 998-999) And, as mentioned earlier, there is, in Milton's view, nothing inherently wrong with "female charm." Clearly, Milton is not attempting to exonerate Eve. But the sympathy with which he depicts her Fall suggests a far more lenient attitude than that of orthodox thinkers of his time. Although he adheres to the old theological view of her priority in guilt, he does not see her as responsible for Adam's Fall. As the "weaker vessel," Eve is in need of Adam's support and instruction. In fairness Milton attributes some of her guilt to Adam's failure in these respects.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, George Williamson, "The Education of Adam," *Modern Philology*, 61 (1963), pp. 96-109.
2. *Paradise Lost*, VII, 514-516. Citations are from Douglas Bush's edition of *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Boston, 1965) and will be given hereafter in the text.
3. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's 'Symposium.'* Latin text edited by Sears Jayne and translated as *The Commentary on Plato's 'Symposium.'* (Columbia, Mo., 1944). All subsequent references to Ficino will be from this text.
4. Barry Gross, in "Free Love and Free Will in *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature*, 7 (1967), pp. 95-106, makes this point.
5. Douglas Bush, "Paradise Lost in Our Time: Religious and Ethical Principles," *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arthur E. Barker (New York, 1965), p. 170.
6. Merritt Y. Hughes, in his edition of *Paradise Lost* (New York, 1962) p. 194, includes the following footnote to this passage: "Adam's knowledge of the beasts included that of their language. On the day of Adam's banishment from Paradise, says the Book of Jubilees (c. 100 B.C.) iii, 28, 'was closed the mouth of all beasts . . . so that they could no longer speak. For they had all spoken one with another with one lip and with one tongue' (Charles's translation)."
7. Marjorie Nicolson, *John Milton: A Reader's Guide to his Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 286.
8. Nicolson, p. 285.