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Adam's Fall and Milton's Intended Message in *Paradise Lost*

There are many areas of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that critics have argued over through the years. One issue that has never been conclusively answered has been why Milton would have Adam willingly fall. Milton establishes conclusively in *Paradise Lost* Adam's foreknowledge of Satan and the probable attempt by Satan to deceive mankind. It is with this knowledge and the knowledge that Eve has already sinned by eating the fruit that Adam faces a dilemma – to eat the fruit or not to eat the fruit. As readers, we know what the choice is. He chooses to eat the fruit. The question is why does Milton portray Adam knowingly sinning? Many scholars have given reasons for Adam's fall, and most of those reasons are results of close readings of the text. While reader-response criticism allows for some interesting interpretations of the text, a New Historicism view of *Paradise Lost* provides new insight into Milton's view of the Fall of man.

There have been many proposals made as to why Milton allows Adam to eat the fruit knowingly. One theory, given by Rupin Desai, posits that Adam's choice to fall is a mirror of Christ's choice to come down to earth and die for the sins of mankind. He writes,

Adam in disobedience to God identifies himself with Eve . . . thus establishing a pattern to be emulated by Christ Adam's humanity, seen in his identifying himself with his human partner is, in a sense, mirrored by Christ who assumes human form . . . that through [his] death [he] might destroy [the devil].

(121)

Desai goes on to link Adam with Christ through focus on scripture, especially the letters by the apostle Paul. Adam's decision to fall "is dictated by his recognition of her [Eve] being an intrinsic part of himself . . . a view corroborated by Paul when he defines the church as an integral part of Christ's body" (123). The comparison works on the surface level, but if one takes the analogy to the full conclusion it does not hold. Adam's decision to fall was made in spite of his better judgment and was made knowing that there would be punishment. Christ's decision to give himself up for mankind was made with the support of God and with the knowledge that he would be resurrected after three days. It is in the book of Matthew that Jesus states, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests . . . They will condemn him to death . . . On the third day he will be raised to life!" (21:18-19). Adam does not have this assurance. Some could also argue that Adam, much like Christ, knowingly fell in spite of the suffering that would inevitably come along with the decision. While this is true, Adam's suffering was a result of his sin. Christ's suffering was a result of mankind's sins, not his own. As the apostle Paul writes in Romans, "For just as through the *disobedience* of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the *obedience* of the one man [Christ] the many will be made righteous" (5:19, italics mine). The obedience that Paul mentions in his letter shows that Christ was without sin in his life. It may seem like a trivial point, but it is an important one nonetheless if the comparison is to be made between Adam and Christ.

Dennis Danielson also compares Adam to Christ, but he does admit that the comparison has its holes, "the analogy between Adam-and-Eve and Christ-and-the-church breaks down precisely at the point where Adam chooses to sin with Eve rather than sinlessly face death for her" (124). Christ was able to be a sacrifice for mankind's redemption, but he was able to do it

without sinning. That Danielson acknowledges this and Desai does not, does not give the argument any more strength.

Other critics have determined that Milton's intent was rooted in Adam's selflessness. One of the better-known critics, A. J. A. Waldock, writes,

The matter then may be summed up quite bluntly by saying that Adam falls through love – not through sensuality, not through uxoriousness, not (above all) through gregariousness – but through love as human beings know it at its best, through true love. (51-52)

The implication in this theory is that it is Adam's immense love for Eve that causes him to be totally selfless and in a way sacrifice himself and willingly fall. This is perhaps an overly romantic view of the Fall and one that is not readily apparent in the text. Adam grapples with the decision that Eve has made,

[S]oon as he heard

The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed,
Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill
Ran through his veins. (9.888-91)

The "horror" that affects Adam is not in any way reminiscent of a normal love emotion. Adam appears to be scared of Eve and the decision that she has made. Adam experiences that horror because he knows that God has promised death as a punishment if they disobey Him. Even the words of Adam, "However I with thee have fixed my lot" (9.952), give the impression of dejection and resignation, not selflessness rooted in love. Waldock's argument looks even weaker when analyzed from a historical standpoint. Much of what Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost* parallels contemporary viewpoints and attitudes in Renaissance England. By looking at

Renaissance texts it is evident that marriages were not rooted in romance, nor did the husband necessarily view his wife as an object of desire first and foremost. Puritan clergymen Robert Dod and John Cleaver wrote that women were to be “silent, obedient, peaceable, patient, studious, to appease [her husband’s] choler if he be angry, painful and diligent in looking to her business, to be solitary and honest.” The inability to do this is the “chief and special cause why most women do fall” (81-82). This does not sound like an equal marriage based on unconditional love - certainly not from the male standpoint. Some could argue that Milton was reflecting the attitudes of Adam and Eve’s age and not of Renaissance England, but where is there evidence of that? Milton, who drew much from the Bible, could not have drawn any inferences regarding the romantic feelings of Adam towards Eve from scripture, as there is none. As he was a product of his own time, it makes sense that the attitudes of romance and marriage would reflect those of Renaissance England.

Perhaps the most well known argument for Milton’s reasoning is presented by Stanley Fish in his well known book *Surprised by Sin*. In the book, Fish argues that Milton uses the fall of Adam and Eve to parallel the reader’s own fall when reading *Paradise Lost* closely. Fish states,

[W]e are asked to measure our response against that of the hero, in *Paradise Lost* we are asked to condemn the hero’s response, and, moreover, to condemn it because at the moment of crisis, he is too much like ourselves [T]he inversion of our natures is exactly what the poem hopes to achieve by bringing us to put off the Old Adam – the body of sin, the conformity to the world, the inborn tendency to evil – and to put on the New. (271)

For Fish, the intent of Milton is clear. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, and specifically Adam's decision, to mirror the fall in the reader. The theory posed by Fish has a solid basis. Adam is a character that readers can identify with on either an emotional or intellectual level (or possibly both). However there are readers who do not sympathize in the way that Fish intends. The major question in Fish's interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, however, is, is the reader-response consistent among Christians and non-Christians? Presumably, Christians would read *Paradise Lost* with a different mindset than non-Christians would. And if this is the case, would not Milton have known this, writing as he did in a time when much, if not all, of his readership would have been religious (either Catholic or Protestant)? The reader, if a Christian, is reading the text knowing the outcome of the creation story and the true nature of all the characters. Satan would not be a sympathetic character, but rather a pathetic character. The Christian, knowing Adam and Eve will fall, reads *Paradise Lost* as a detective views a crime scene – trying to figure out the facts and how the crime was committed – not as an accomplice in the crime (as I think Fish implies). The fall of Adam and Eve therefore would not cause the Christian reader to fall, but rather to understand or gain knowledge. The knowledge gained would provide the Christian reader with an understanding of the why and the how of Adam's choice. This is consistent with Milton's assertion that the purpose of *Paradise Lost* is to "justify the ways of God to men" (1.26).

It is with these interpretations in mind that a different theory is proposed – the theory that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, and specifically the willful fall of Adam, as an argument – and possibly even a celebration of – the effects of knowledge. Many theologians and church leaders over time have wrestled with the implications of the Fall of man. One of the conclusions that they have come to is that the Fall was actually a good thing because it allowed Christ to come

down to earth to redeem mankind. This redemption allowed for God's grace to be made available to man when it previously would not have been. The idea has been called *felix culpa* – or “happy fall.” With Milton, it can be argued that Adam's fall provided mankind with another kind of *felix culpa* – a fall into knowledge.

The basis for this new *felix culpa* can be found by taking another look at *Paradise Lost* as well as other texts by Milton and by taking a closer look at the scientific revolution that was occurring during the Renaissance period. Milton shows early in *Paradise Lost* Adam's desire to gain knowledge. His conversations with Raphael should foreshadow to the reader the decision that Adam will make later in the poem. Russell E. Smith writes,

‘To know’ is, of course, not in itself wrong [T]he contemplation of God's goodness and power should be Man's greatest pleasure, the more Adam knows of God the happier he may be. The difference between healthy and unhealthy desire to know is in the origin of the desire. If knowledge is sought for the greater glory of God, the curiosity is praiseworthy. If knowledge is desired as a means of elevating the self, the desire is perverse. (529)

This is a key point. If it can be concluded that Adam's desire for knowledge was to elevate him, then it follows that Satan's goal in orchestrating the Fall was to pervert knowledge. But God, allowing the Fall to happen, used what Satan intended for evil, for good. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* from a fallen viewpoint. After Adam, everyone is fallen. So Milton, in writing the Fall of man, did so with the assumption that the pursuit of knowledge is necessary to grow closer to God. Even though Adam chose to pursue knowledge for his own gain, God has allowed that the pursuit of knowledge post-Fall is an appropriate pursuit.

Milton believed this pursuit of knowledge important when he wrote in *Areopagitica*, “God commits the managing of so great a trust [the pursuit of knowledge], without particular law or prescription, wholly to the demeanour of every grown man” (247). He goes on to write,

Opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making [W]e should rather praise this pious forwardness among men to reassume the ill-deputed care of their religion into their own hands again. A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and some grain of charity might win all these diligencies to join and unite into one general brotherly search after truth. (265-66)

For Milton, this pursuit of knowledge was necessary to gain truth. The truth Milton was writing about was the truth that Smith wrote about – truths to better glorify God. Milton therefore views the Fall as net positive because it allows for man to pursue God more completely than before.

Milton goes further in his essay *Of Education*:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents [Adam & Eve] by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. (227)

It was the view of Milton, and other learned scholars and thinkers of the Renaissance period, that the pursuit of knowledge was desirable to grow closer to God. It is important to remember that Milton lived in the middle of the Scientific Revolution. This revolution changed the way Western science operated permanently. Men like Copernicus, Newton, Kepler, and Galileo provided new theories about the operations of the universe that were previously unheard of. The effect of science on society was not lost on Milton. As a contemporary of Galileo, it is unlikely

that Milton was unaware of the research and findings of Galileo or others in the scientific community during this time. It follows then that Milton would incorporate science and the pursuit of knowledge into *Paradise Lost* as something that Adam and Eve struggle with. It is only through the perversion of knowledge that man is taken away from God, not drawn near to Him.

Some will argue that Raphael's admonishment toward Adam in Book VIII shows that God is against knowledge of astronomical proportions. Adam asks Raphael about the cosmos and the orbital patterns of celestial bodies, to which Raphael replies, "heaven is for thee too high / To know what passes there; be lowly wise" (9.172-73). He is telling Adam to focus on the things that God has placed for him and not of things that do not concern him. The argument can be made that the pursuit of science is wrong and that Adam was wrong for trying to glean these answers. However, this needs to be viewed from two angles: the first is that if we stay completely in the text (assuming a world where man has not fallen yet), it logically follows that Raphael would tell Adam to focus on earthly things because that is the responsibility that Adam has been given. Adam and Eve have not fallen and therefore are not separated from God through sin. They have a direct relationship with God and are able to intercede to Him directly. Their sole purpose was to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). This was their calling that would glorify God. After the Fall, God changed His purpose for Adam and Eve, "Cursed is the ground because of you . . . By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and dust you will return" (Genesis 3:17-19). God placed manual labor into Adam and Eve's lives as a result of the Fall. This manual labor, or hard work, can be interpreted

as the struggle to gain what was previously freely given. In the case of all mankind, that acquisition is the salvation from hell. In Milton's case, it was the pursuit of knowledge.

The second angle by which to view this conversation is through history. If we view Raphael's admonition through a "fallen" perspective in history, the admonition is more of an admission – the admission that there are conflicting scientific views of the universe. Raphael is speaking Milton's words, not God's words. Raphael is telling Adam to be concerned with earthly things and not heavenly things, not because it is wrong to know those things, but because the debate during Milton's lifetime was not yet settled. While Milton was a friend of Galileo and would have been fully aware of Galileo and Copernicus' position of a heliocentric model of the universe, Ptolemy's geocentric model of the universe was still the accepted position. The reason that Raphael does not tell Adam the answer to the universe's workings is that Milton does not know. Milton, like many others in his time, was waiting for the scientific community to settle on a side. It is not that Adam cannot know; it is that Milton does not know.

It is precisely all this talk about knowledge and knowing that is the heart of *Paradise Lost*. While the reader-response method of criticism has provided many interesting and significant takes on Milton's epic poem, it is through the lens of history that an understanding of Milton's intended statement on knowledge is gained. As Milton intended, much of *Paradise Lost* focuses on the pursuit of knowledge, and this pursuit of knowledge can be seen as both the cause *and* the effect of the Fall. The cause of Adam's willing fall into sin was his desire for self-elevating knowledge, but it was through this fall that mankind was able to grow in God-glorifying knowledge and as a result, grow closer to God. That is after all what Milton wanted the reader to know.

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