

# Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

## Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*

To the Editor:

It is a pity that Georgia B. Christopher's argument of Adam's "return to faith" ("The Verbal Gate to Paradise: Adam's 'Literary Experience' in Book x of *Paradise Lost*," *PMLA*, 90, 1975, 69–77) so uncharitably dismisses Eve's hand in Adam's return, as though there were but one precise instant of such return. Like Samson's, Adam's "return" is progressive, has stages of illumination. Adam is wiser through his "hearing" again Christ's pronouncement some lines earlier. But if we are to compare Luther's epiphanic moment of return (p. 74) with a similar experience of Adam's, it is not in Book x with knowledge and illumination still too incomplete, but in Book xii where Adam hears again the promise from Michael, and truly understands the stunning truth of this gift of Grace bestowed upon him and Eve and their progeny (ll. 386–478). But, whenever that "grand moment" (l. 74), without Eve's plea *first* opening Adam's eyes, he could not have heard again "the promise" (p. 74).

While it may be true that to Calvin and Luther "the notion that woman's love can lead man to love of God appears sentimental" (p. 69), Calvin, one spokesman for Reformational view, does see in conjugal love a spiritual relationship and defends it as such:

Christ deems marriage worthy of such honor that he wills it to be an image of his sacred union with the church. What more splendid commendation could be spoken of the dignity of marriage? . . . in which a likeness of Christ's spiritual grace shines forth! (*Institutes*, ed. McNeill, iv.xii.24)

And it is Reformational theology that brings to marriage a loving relationship heretofore not emphasized.

But on to Eve sole purpose and sole cause. Because there is sufficient textual evidence of Eve's sincerity, my concern is her hand in Adam's redemption, and by extension, the necessity of selflessness for her own receiving of Grace. Christopher's estimation of Eve's actions as "self-serving" (p. 69) is not in accord with the overall meaningfulness of her role as conjugal lover or as creature of God. It is not in accord with Milton's Puritan concept of conjugal love; a concept throughout his writings that goes hand-in-hand with divine love. Can a self-serving love be "sole propriety / In Paradise

of all things common else" or "the scale / By which to heav'nly Love thou may'st ascend?" Whatever Eve's selfish moments, contrition, love, on her part, *as God's creature*, must now be sincere, selfless, or the requirements of Grace go unfulfilled. Eve is Mother of Mankind. If Milton intended Eve's integrity to be questioned why her plea with "Heav'n" as "witness" to "What love sincere" she bears him—a plea utterly blasphemous unless sincere. Why Milton's statement "Fell humble"? Why Eve's dignity and honesty far superior to Adam's in the sentencing scene? To believe Eve motivated by self-interest and fear of "total isolation" (p. 75) is to overlook Christian implications essential to the total harmony of Book x as well as to the epic itself.

Besides, why would Eve fear "total isolation" when she assumes their life to be "scarse one short hour perhaps." Her plea for Adam's "gentle looks," his "aid," his "counsel," makes right use of what she wrongly used before. Eve recognizes Adam's rightful place as her "Author," and "Head." Her submission now to what she formerly "had displeas'd" Adam is aware of. He is also aware that her plea stems from love for him (ll. 948–52). That Eve is in need of wise counsel is evident. It is now Adam's turn to correct her faulty logic, and in doing so to recall Christ's promise.

Grace requires more of Adam than just "choose to live" (p. 75), for without *first* turning *back again* to Eve, he could not turn to God:

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses,  
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.  
(Matt. vi.15)

Adam must first "strive / In offices of Love" before he can go before God in "humiliation meek." Adam's "*instant de passage*" (p. 75) may well be that precise moment when he, in words redemptive, takes on full blame—something he could not do at the time of Christ's sentence.

However irrational and self-centered Christopher sees Eve's plea, it seems unlikely Milton intended it as such. Why would he have couched her offer in words strikingly similar to Christ's offer in Book iii if he intended her offer to be but a "wild" one stemming from an "almost instinctive gesture of self-preservation" (p. 75). If we accept this rationale then we are obliged to

deem the similarity of statement a point of intentional parody, a view hardly in decorum with the moment; hardly in keeping with the movement of Book x—restoration of harmony between man and God; hardly in keeping with the Christian concept of individual responsibility to God.

Eve does figure in the restoration. She, too, is God's creature lately loved. And it is *together* they must go before God—no longer estranged by anger or despair. Only unselfishness on Eve's part could allow her to fulfill with Adam the expected responsibility of Godliness. By the end of Book x both have "put on charity," that necessary "bond of perfection" of which St. Paul speaks (Col. iii.14).

Though Christopher believes otherwise, "the reconciliation between man and woman" is "the most affecting thing in Book x" (l. 76). The "eyes of Reformation faith" may academically focus elsewhere, but without reconciliation there could be no restoration with God, nor any "sudden opening of the promise" for Adam. And, really, is not "ordinary human frailty" (p. 76) what Christianity is all about? Can Adam understand God's ways or His promises without *first* forgiving Eve? By instigating the act of forgiveness in Adam, Eve not only brings about his recollection of Christ's promise, but encourages the act of love necessary to his own salvation. "A new commandment I give unto you that ye love one another: as I have loved you that ye also love one another" (John xiii.34). Eve is *first* to respond to Christ's command—however unknowingly.

To be sure, Adam does not ride into Grace on Eve's coattails; nor Eve on Adam's. They walk the solitary way hand in hand with Providence their guide.

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*Ms. Christopher replies:*

The genius of *Paradise Lost*, as of any classic, is that it draws passionate responses from readers far removed in time and sympathy from the milieu that gave it shape. I have no wish to declare Jeanne Hunter's attractive interpretation a literary heresy, but merely to point out that it is historically improbable. If, however, one wishes to explain puzzling features of the poem by recourse to the theology and hermeneutics of its time, one cannot agree with Hunter that Milton assumed there to be some "requirements for grace."

To argue that Adam must forgive and love Eve before he can understand the promise—still less that Eve's selfless love is "necessary" to elicit from Adam "the act of love necessary to his own salvation"—is to reverse the cardinal tenet of Puritan doctrine. In a reading of any "historical" validity, one must remem-

ber that the Reformers were quite rigorous in maintaining that grace was administered by no human agent and was won by no human effort; it occurred as a mysterious gift when one "heard" divine words. The Protestant scholastics who followed Luther and Calvin were so concerned with the point that they in effect de-emphasized charity. Milton in *Christian Doctrine* returns to the Reformers' original insight that faith and love are inextricably linked (CD, ed. Maurice Kelley, trans. John Carey, Vol. vi, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973, pp. 490–94). Though he eschews the formula *sola fide*, he gives faith clear priority.

Milton was well aware that some biblical texts were embarrassing to his position. The story of Mary Magdalene presented one such embarrassment. This is how Milton got round the difficulty:

As for Luke vii.47: *her many sins are forgiven, for she has loved much*, it should be noticed that love was here not the cause but the sign or even the effect of forgiveness. This is evident from the parable, which begins at vii.40. . . . Obviously the quality which saved her was the quality which justified her, and that was not love, but faith. (CD, pp. 493–94)

Milton disposed of the texts adduced by Hunter (Matt. vi.15, John xiii.34, and Col. iii.14) by relegating them to the section on ethics near the end of *Christian Doctrine*, where their only occurrence in the entire tract falls under the rubric, "OF MAN'S DUTY TOWARDS HIS NEIGHBOR" (CD, pp. 742, 748, 749 respectively).

The question of whether Eve's offer in Book x is intended to echo Christ cannot be fully answered here, for it brings up the crux of Renaissance hermeneutics: When is it legitimate to find oblique reference, parallels to, allegories of, and types for Christ? In the space allotted me here I can say only that neither Eve nor her words have ever seemed to me reminiscent of the Christ of Book III. The very texture of the narrative in Book x. I think, discourages such comparison. I find that the earthly scenes in *Paradise Lost* share the prevailing focus of Reformation commentaries, which view Old Testament figures as fellow Christians. With much "naturalistic" elaboration of dramatic situation and psychology, they detail how divine words come to kings and patriarchs with renovating effect and affect. Consistently they make the point that "saving" grace occurs when one responds to divine words, not when one responds to other people.

To be sure, Reformation commentary finds large providential patterns emerging from the experience of kings and prophets, from their final despair no less than from steadfast faith. I then agree that Eve's submission to her husband belongs to the "predestinate" long-range plan of history which called for the human race and the incarnation.

The regeneration of Adam as an individual charac-