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Like Father, Like Son

Abstract: This essay will look at Milton's definition of a fit partner as presented in Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce and how Adam falls short of being a fit partner for Eve. Specifically, this essay will focus on Adam's lack of understanding of communications reciprocal nature, how this misunderstanding rendered him an unfit partner by Milton's own standards and how by being unfit help, Adam inadvertently contributed to the conditions that led to man's fall inside Paradise Lost.

Mother of man, mother of sin. Regardless of which of these two labels one may choose to apply to Eve, both of these still end up marginalizing her and attempting to distill her identity down to a single act. Both labels fail to account for her feelings, her fears, her confusion and for any of the other tumultuous thoughts that were racing through her consciousness. We evaluate what she was to us and never even consider what we may have been to her. While this flawed conceptual model of Eve may be chalked up as being the consequence of time, separation and poorly translated pastoral teachings, the reality is that this egocentric view of her has been with humanity ever since Eve drew her first breath. We have Adam to thank for this. As bad as his perspective may have been for those that follow him, his intense self-focus was even more disastrous for the one woman whom he supposedly held dearer than life itself. Adam ended up failing Eve because the egocentric approach he took to their relationship, namely his failure to

attend to Eve's needs, ended up stifling communication and ultimately created a bond so weak that it couldn't even withstand paradise.

To evaluate Adam's efficacy as a partner, it's important to judge him not by modern day standards but by the standards for a good partner that Milton himself put forward in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. However, where we will evaluate Adam from a modern lens is by looking at Milton's essay on divorce from a gender-neutral perspective. This will help to somewhat nullify the double standard. In the essay Milton posited that the purpose behind marriage was "the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life" (*Doctrine and Discipline* 703). Even above procreation, he valued companionship and the intellectual engagement of conversation, so clearly this is crucial for Milton. As he goes on, he clarifies that the reason conversation is so integral is that it helps to stave off loneliness, which is both a hell itself and a gateway to actual hell since people frequently turn to vices in order to escape loneliness (*Doctrine and Discipline* 707). However, while trying to justify divorce, he noted that companionship alone was not enough and that if you aren't in a connected and engaged relationship, that loneliness will still seep in and that feeling of loneliness while with someone else is worse than the solitary kind (*Doctrine and Discipline* 712). In summation, Milton believed that in order for a marriage to be truly satisfying and good, there had to be effective and fulfilling communication that leads to a greater sense of understanding for all parties involved. However, in *Paradise Lost*, when looking closer at the dynamic between Adam and Eve it becomes obvious that even though Eve tried her hardest to have this type of relationship, it was never meant to be, because even though Eve may have been created for Adam, Adam was created for God and in his image and as a result, Adam's focus would always be either personal or celestial.

Although Eve attempted to have a traditional relationship with Adam, one with intimate and reciprocal conversations and engagement, it didn't end up working because Adam would inevitably cycle everything back to God. For example, in Book 4, after having addressed Adam as her "Author and Disposer" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 635), she goes on to ask him about what happens with the stars in the sky. The question of the stars wasn't what mattered here communication-wise; in this passage Eve builds up Adam with the author comment, equates him with God, tells him he's all she needs and appeals to him as an authority with the question. This shows an intimate understanding of her partner and an attempt to make him happy. Although Adam does technically answer her question, it's how he does it that shows his lack of engagement with Eve, the person. Instead of addressing her as his wife or as his love or something reciprocally sappy, he calls her "Daughter of God and Man" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 660). In that title, he identifies her as not an equal but a product of himself and God. He then goes on to follow this heaven-bound focus, answering the question by explaining that it's done this way so God can be adored at all hours. Although Adam technically answered Eve, and did it in a "good" and pious way, he failed Eve in this specific conversation because he either completely missed what she was trying to do, due to his preoccupation with religion, or grasped it and ignored it so he could cycle it back to God. While one may say this unfair to criticize him for, that this wasn't failing Eve since he was praising God, it's important to remember that the question wasn't whether Adam was a good partner to God, it's whether he was good to Eve.

One could refute the idea that Adam was a poor communicator by pointing to the innumerable conversations he had with Eve in the garden. After all, it's hard to accuse a husband who talks that much to his wife daily of failing to communicate. Even if he missed nuances such as with the star conversation and perhaps was a little too focused on the heavens, he was trying.

Besides that, he dutifully relays God and Raphael's messages to Eve. However, as any person who has been on the wrong end of a relationship talk will tell you, there's a big difference between talking and communicating. The Garden conversation wasn't an isolated incident; Adam demonstrates a pattern of ignoring Eve's feelings instead of exploring and giving them due diligence (like Eve would do with his thoughts). Adam would simply tell her it's not their concern and to move on. One prime example of this is in Book 5. After telling Adam about a troubling dream she had, notably that she was afraid because she couldn't find Adam in it, he dismisses her by saying the dream was the fault of "lesser fears" even going as far as to say "Be not disheart'n'd then, nor cloud those looks, that wont to be more cheerful and serene" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 122-123). Even after she started crying, Adam failed to recognize her pain and simply tried to kiss away her tears. Even though he replied to her and did his best, his preoccupation with belief in God's control and his emphasis that Adam was above Eve blinded him to his wife's distress. At one point in Book 9, she even outright told him to shut up and listen, "Thou therefore now advise/ Or hear what to my mind thoughts first present" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 212). Eve could be faulted for waiting until after the Fall to make this comment but it's important to remember the power discrepancy between her and Adam. No matter how blatantly she stated her need to be heard or considered, Adam didn't hear it. Even though she spoke, she wasn't heard.

At this point, there's an easy counterpoint to be made. Sure, Adam and Eve may have had some lapses in communication and he probably should have thought about her feelings a little bit more. But to chalk up her problems and the fall as Adam's fault seems like a bit of an overstep. However, this may simply be the product of our projections and such, it seems prudent to examine him strictly by the standard Milton himself set forth. In *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton talks about how a lack of companionship can cause a mind to "wander" or even

take refuge “in their neighbors bed” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 707). Additionally, Milton added that when one’s in a bad marriage, it inhibits your ability to find salvation and the lord (*Doctrine and Discipline*). In the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s Book 8 argument, where he ignored her in favor of Raphael, their interaction was contentious and we saw the previously devoted Eve suddenly wishing to strike out on her own. This act of independence by Eve also undercut Adam’s sole authority regarding religion, as she questioned whether his fear was just (*Paradise Lost* 9: 285-286). Since Adam’s almost exclusive focus was God, the only way for her to assert independence in a way he would notice was to assert it over a religious matter. In this way, Adam indirectly led her away from the “correct” path of God and into peril where her salvation was at stake. Both consequences of a bad marriage are shown here: Eve was both led away into temptation of straying and led into circumstances that jeopardized her faith and salvation. Had Adam been a more effective partner, and not consistently undercut her feelings so he could talk about God and himself, Eve may well have never felt the need to test herself. While Adam’s failing as a partner wasn’t to directly lead her there, he did create the conditions in their relationship that led to the inevitable Fall.

Even considering the consequences of her fall, while it may be easy to blame her course of action in attempting to assert independence, thus earning Adam’s attention and respect, it’s hard to blame her motivations. Throughout the epic, Eve’s motivation isn’t malice or a wish to tear Adam apart from God, It was simply a wish to be acknowledged as an equal and to be treated that way in more than name only. For example, when Eve was being lured into the ultimate sin at the end, the key point wasn’t the snake appealing to her vanity but the snake appealing to her sense of powerlessness by calling her empress repeatedly (*Paradise Lost* 9: 578) and suggesting that if she was closer to God, then maybe Adam would heed her words with the same weight he

did the Lord's. His speech to her was an appeal to her powerlessness: "The trodden herb, of abject thoughts and low/ As was my food, nor aught but food discern'd/ or sex; and noting apprehended high"(Paradise Lost 9.572-575). Knowing Eve oversaw the plants, he used floral metaphors for how she was being undervalued. The trodden herb referenced her ignored intellect, the food symbolized fruit, or how she was valued for her "fruit"(children) and how her sex led her to be ignored. This hit right at the core of the problems Eve had in the garden. Additionally, he made great lengths to point out that it was a Tree of Knowledge, not a beast, and as such technically under her domain. While the use of the title "Empress" may be seen as preying upon her vanity, it's important to remember that while Eve was simply "mother of mankind", Adam was given plenty of more prestigious titles. This wasn't an attempt to rise above him, just to become equal to him. Further compounding this point, upon realizing how badly she'd messed up, she showed great remorse begging God to let her suffer the punishment of the fall alone and to let Adam go. This willingness to bear the pain alone showed that even though she was fighting desperately to be valued, she hadn't lost her love for Adam and that she wasn't a bad partner. She was willing to put her life on the line for him, yet he couldn't put his philosophy on the shelf for her. Sadly, no matter how hard she tried to get Adam to respect her and her humanity, it would always end up backfiring because Adam's singular focus blinded him to anything apart from the heavens and himself.

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam proved himself unfit for help for Eve because his self-absorbed view of their relationship severely damaged their communication and ended up driving Eve towards her fall. All relationships have their problems and their conflicts, but the fact that Adam couldn't have a healthy connection with a woman who was literally made for him suggests a pretty severe failing on his part. In fact, he was only able to start placing priority on her after

being expelled from the garden and being driven from God. Maybe if the figure that Adam worshipped and emulated was himself a better communicator things would have turned out different but at the end of the day that falls on god as much as Adam, regardless of if Milton's God and the father of Adam would accept the blame for their shortcomings. It's only natural Adam took after his heavenly father: like father like son.

Works Cited

Hughes, Merritt Y. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Indianapolis: Odyssey, 1957. Print.