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A Household on Shakey Ground: Adam, Eve, and an Undefined Household

*Abstract: The relationship between Adam and Eve is…complicated, and it’s only further complicated when looking at how they each view their relationship before and after the fall. Adam views Eve as an equal, yet Eve sees herself as below Adam. Then, they disobey God; as they fall from grace, their prelapsarian perceptions become their postlapsarian punishments.*

Throughout John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the concept of patriarchy presents itself heavily in the relationship between Adam and Eve. Milton’s idea of their prelapsarian relationship is complicated to say the least. There is a constant question of whether the two are equal or if a hierarchy separates them. In Adam’s mind, he and Eve are equal, whereas Eve sees herself as dependent upon Adam. Things are further complicated following the temptation and the fall when a clear power difference between the two is solidified while the fall raises complicated questions about who is to blame or if it is even their fault. Neither Adam nor Eve views their relationship in the same way, and because of this, they are punished in a way which establishes a clear hierarchy which places Adam on top and forces Eve below.

From the introduction of Adam and Eve, the paradox of equality and subordination becomes clear. During one of their first conversations in the poem, Adam tells Eve that they must do their tasks, since “man hath his daily work of body or mind/appointed, which declares his dignity/and the regard of Heav’n on all his ways” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 618-620). Though he uses the word “man,” Adam is referring to the both of them. Eve’s response, however, immediately places her below Adam, saying “my author and disposer, what thou bidd’st/unargued I obey; God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more/is woman’s happiest knowledge and her praise” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 635-638). Despite their equal stance in Adam’s statement, Eve acknowledges that there is a difference. Adam is her “author” whom she blindly obeys.

Following the encounter between Satan and Gabriel at the end of Book 4, Adam and Eve awaken and discuss Eve’s dream. In this conversation, Adam once again uses language to place Eve beside himself. Upon first waking, he says to Eve that “the fresh field/calls us; we lose the prime, to mark how spring/our tended plants” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 20-22). Similarly to how he spoke of their jobs in Book 4, Adam notes that tending to the garden is both his and Eve’s responsibility since he refers to the plants being theirs. Adam again reiterates the equality between himself and Eve when he comforts her after she tells him about his dream. He calls her “best image of myself and dearer half” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 95). He then says that her problems impact him as they do her since he says to her, “the trouble of thy thoughts this night in sleep affects me equally” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 96-97). Adam’s use of the word “half” is a direct indication that he considers Eve to be his equal. Although his use of “equally” when referring to the effects of Eve’s bad dreams is most likely figurative, it does not change the fact that Adam’s happiness is dependent upon Eve’s happiness.

Another way in which Adam and Eve view their relationship differently before the fall is in how they recount their stories of creation. Eve acknowledges that she is dependent on Adam for her existence, saying that “without whom I am to no end” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 442). While telling this story, Eve quotes Adam. In her retelling, Adam is again stating that he sees her as being on his level. Quoting Adam, she says that he told her, “to give thee being I lent/out of my side to thee, nearest to my heart/substantial life, to have thee by my side” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 483-485). Adam reiterates his belief that he and Eve are equal when he retells his own creation story to Raphael. Something Adam heavily focuses on is the solitude that he feels. He pleads with God to create him an equal by comparing himself to the animals in the garden. What he wants is something “which must be mutual, in proportion due/giv’n and received” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 385-386). He then says of the animals that:

…they rejoice

Each with their kind, lion with lioness;

So fitly them in pairs thou hast combined;

Much less can bird with beast, or fish with fowl

So well converse, nor with the ox the ape;

Worse then can man with beast, and least of all (*Paradise Lost* 8: 392-397).

Adam does not feel that these creatures of the garden can alleviate his loneliness because they are not equal to him. He wants a “mutual.” For him, this is Eve. Interestingly, it’s only Eve who sees herself as subordinate. Following her creation, Adam once again reiterates their equality:

…I now see

Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, my self

Before me; woman is her name, of man

Extracted; for this cause he shall forgo

Father and mother, and to his wife adhere;

And they shall be one flesh, one heart, one soul. (*Paradise Lost* 8: 494-499)

Because Eve could not exist without Adam, it creates a hierarchy of dependency, yet Adam chooses not to acknowledge it when considering their relationship.

Their perceptions of their equality change after the fall. For Eve, the first time she even considers herself to be on the same level as Adam is immediately after consuming the fruit. Up to this point, she had placed herself below Adam. The fruit, however, made her conscious of the fact that she is not equal to him. When debating whether or not to share the fruit with Adam, she realizes that the knowledge she has gained places her on equal standing with Adam that if she doesn’t share, it would “render me more equal, and perhaps/a thing nor undesirable, sometime superior; for inferior who is free?” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 823-825). She then decides that she would rather them be equal in their damnation and says that “Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 831). Adam in turn justifies his eating of the fruit because of his belief that he and Eve are equal. Before he eats, he says to Eve that “our state cannot be severed, we are one/one flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 958-959). Despite Eve’s desire to be equal with Adam, she had already been his equal in his eyes. Only the knowledge brought on by the fruit makes her aware that equality is even possible. As for Adam, his belief of equality with Eve pushed him to disobey God.

The punishment that the two receive following their disobedience not only highlights how they viewed their relationship before the fall, but it outlines how their postlapsarian relationship will define the husband-wife dynamic for the rest of humanity. When the Son goes to the garden, he says that part of Adam’s failure was considering Eve to be equal to himself. The Son says that in doing so, Adam “didst resign thy manhood, and the place/wherein God set thee above her made of thee” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 148-149). The Son then says that Eve was not created to be Adam’s equal. He tells Adam that she was “lovely to attract/thy love, not thy subjection” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 152-153). Though Adam’s punishment is not explicitly stated like Eve’s, his is tied into Eve’s. Her punishment is that “to thy husband’s will/thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule” (*Paradise Lost* 10: 195-196). This punishment forces Eve back into the position of subordinance that she had begun to question after eating the fruit. The only difference she is no longer willfully submissive to Adam. For Adam, this punishment prevents him from truly achieving the one thing he ever wanted: an equal. Because he is now forced to treat her as a subordinate, he can never have an equal.

In retrospect, neither Adam nor Eve seems to fully understand what their relationship is before the fall in part because of the unclear distinctions made by God himself. One explanation for this is that God as an omnipotent and infinite being cannot truly understand equality nor solitude in the way that Adam does. God’s first response to Adam’s despair about his solitude implies this. He says, “What call’st thou solitude, is not the earth/with various living creatures, and the air/replenished, and all these at thy command” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 369-371). Adam clarifies himself, and God once again responds in a way that makes it seem he does not understand what Adam means. He asks Adam, “What think’st thou then of me, and this my state?/Seem I to thee sufficiently possessed/of happiness, or not?” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 403-405). Adam once again responds to God to try and make him understand. He tells God, “No need that thou/shouldst propagate, already infinite/and through all numbers absolute, though One” (*Paradise Lost* 8:419-421). Because of God’s infinite existence, Adam points out that God is never alone. God’s experience of existence is extremely different than that of Adam’s.

Additionally, this fault in understanding extends to how God intended the power dynamic he intended to exist between Adam and Eve. Once God finally decides to grant Adam’s wish, he says to Adam, “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” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 449-451). While at first this seems to indicate equality, looking at language used elsewhere in the poem creates the potential for difference. The most striking instance of this is in the relationship between God and the Son. The narrator describes the Son as being ‘most glorious, in him all his Father shone/substantially expressed, and in his face/divine compassion visibly appeared” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 139-141). After the Son says he will sacrifice himself for humanity, the angels note the likeness between the two:

Begotten Son, Divine Similitude,

In whose conspicuous count’nance, without cloud

Made visible, th’ Almighty Father shines,

Whom else no creature can behold; (*Paradise Lost* 3: 384-387).

From these two passages, the language used to describe the creation of the Son parallels the language God uses with Adam to describe his creation with Eve. The Son was made in God’s “likeness” just like Eve was made in Adam’s. At the same time, the Son is not on an equal level with God. Like Eve, the Son acknowledges his subordination to God. During the war in Heaven, he praises God, calling him, “O Father, O Supreme of Heav’nly thrones,/first, highest, holiest, best” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 723-724). The Son places God above himself in the same way Eve does with Adam.

Another explanation for why Adam and Eve’s relationship is not clear is that God purposefully does not explain it to either of them. This point is argued by Jessica Lauren Stephenson in the paper “Milton’s Match Made in Paradise.” Stephenson argues that God purposefully ignored Adam’s request for an equal partner. This is because “Adam lacks a worshipper” (Stephenson 3). Adam was created to worship God, and because of the natural order of creation, Eve was created to worship God through Adam. The narrator even supports this, saying at one point, “He for God only, she for God in him” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 299). Stephenson argues that the natural hierarchy follows this pattern, and that “Adam is created to be like God but not equal to God. Similarly, Eve is created to be like Adam, but not equal to Adam” (Stephenson 3). The only problem is that God never explains this to Adam.

Following the fall, Adam and Eve completely shift their views of their relationship dynamic. While Adam once saw Eve as his equal, he now treats her as a subordinate. For Eve, the fall only solidified her position below Adam after becoming aware of potential equality between herself and Adam only after eating the forbidden fruit. What Milton is attempting to do with this is not exactly clear. On one hand, this justifies the patriarchy since it gives a heavenly reason for why women should be under the thumb of their husbands. On the other, it criticizes this same system. Adam is punished for treating Eve as an equal or superior even though the only sin he truly committed was eating the fruit. If God wanted Adam to be above Eve, he did not command it to be so until he dealt them their punishments for disobedience. At the same time, Milton raises the question of whether they should be to blame at all for their disobedience. Either God could not conceptualize or chose not to create a true equal for Adam. God also never felt the need to clarify this to Adam. Because of this, Adam could not have known that his actions were wrong and would set in motion the chain of events leading to the fall of humanity.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Penguin, 2003.

Stephenson, Jessica Lauren. “Milton’s Match Made in Paradise.” *Edifice Project*, 7 May 2010. http://edificeproject.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/A-Match-Made-in-Paradise.pdf.