THE EDUCATION OF EVE:

by Jo-Anne Isaak

Milton

Milton considers a "compleat 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

\[
\ldots \text{to adore}
\]
\[
\text{And worship God Supreme,}
\]
\[
\text{who made him chief}
\]
\[
\text{Of all his works.} \tag{2}
\]

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)

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 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 lies 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 darksom 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,  
the fall of others from like  
state of bliss...  
(V, 238-241)

When Raphael arrives in Eden, he in- 
forms 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 re- 
ceives 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 decor- 
um 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 state- 
ments, such as "God is thy law, thou  
mine; to know no more/is woman's hap- 
piest 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 an hierarchy wherein each  
individual does not have a direct re- 
lation 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 in-
formation. 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 in- 
tended function: their role is not so  
much to maintain the garden as to sus-
tain 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,
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 dishonor lurks.
Safest and seemliest by her husband 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 dependent 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 perverse and willful and listen to what she is saying, we realize that she believes 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 unsought may find
Us both secure 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 exercise 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 prepare 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 prematurely alone in the sense of her educational 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

(IX, 562-566)

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

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., 1344). All subsequent references to Ficino will be from this text.
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.) II, 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)."