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Casual Discourse Lost: The Separation of Adam and Eve

Jay Curlin

> My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst
> Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,
> God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more
> Is womans happiest knowledge and her praise.
> With thee conversing I forget all time . . . .
> (*Paradise Lost* IV.635-9)

The critical separation scene between Adam and Eve in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* has long been something of a crux for Milton's readers. Recent critical opinion of the passage has seen in it chiefly an indictment of Adam: for one group of readers, he is the overbearing husband trying to suppress the burgeoning independence of his wife; for another, he fails as a spiritual leader in not suppressing that independence enough. I would like to offer an alternative reading of the passage by redirecting our attention to the simple dynamics of what we must remember is ultimately a *pre*lapsarian debate between disputants who are, as a consequence, inherently guiltless. Rather than exploring who is most responsible for the loss of Paradise, Milton shows us chiefly in this scene what occurs in discourse when unfallen humans are simply unable to agree.

While the last exchange between Adam and Eve prior to the Fall comes closer to the spirit of postlapsarian "argument" than any other conversation they have before the "vain contest" of "mutual accusation" at the end of Book IX, the debate still occurs

in a prelapsarian world and enjoys many of the characteristics of the Miltonic ideal of polemic seen in the exchanges between God and the Son, Raphael and Adam, and God and Adam. Of one of the more striking aspects of the debate, we are not actually aware until its close: throughout the entire dispute, Adam and Eve are holding hands. When Eve makes her final response and separates from Adam, Milton emphasizes that separation all the more by a very literal severance of a physical bond that has joined them even in the heat of dispute: "from her Husbands hand her hand / Soft she withdrew" (385-6).

While this underscores the critical division of the pair and the end of a degree of harmony they will never know again, it also reminds us that this final debate before the Fall enjoys much of the congeniality we see in the discourse of other unfallen beings:

> The knowledge that the dialogue has been spoken handfast . . . spreads an afterglow over its tone that should dispel any suspicion we might have had that it is a domestic squabble and confirm its gravity and tenderness. (McColley 168)

While disagreeing as independent rational beings, Adam and Eve place their disagreement in the context of domestic concord and attempt sincerely to come to a consensus. They employ nothing of the oratorical deception of demonic dispute; in contrast to the pomp of Pandemonium or the histrionics of the serpent, Adam and Eve open a simple discussion that evolves naturally into a dispute only when they find that, for the first time, they disagree. What follows is an honest and logical examination of the issues, an open inquiry that is prelapsarian in all but the most important respect: it falls critically short of mutual agreement.

Fowler has noted that there is, however, one important difference between this exchange and earlier conversations in which

the two are engaged in that Eve initiates the discussion: "Eve first to her Husband thus began" (204).[1] Certainly one of the most notable aspects of the debate is that Eve insists on having both the first and the last word, even after Adam has effectually closed the debate by acceding to her wishes. Since such comparative garrulity on Eve's part is a clear deviation from the usual pattern of their conversations, in which Adam initiates and concludes their discussions, and in which Eve is chiefly an attentive but passive listener, Eve's initiation of the discussion of their separation hints that this colloquy may take a much different turn.

The very abruptness with which Eve opens the discussion signals a new, less courteous tone to their conversations. Deviating from Adam's example, Eve does not preface her remarks with a complimentary address; she opens with a simple, unmodified vocative: "*Adam*, well may we labour still to dress / This Garden . . . " (205-6). In contrast, Adam prefaces all but one of his responses with a glowing tribute to his "opponent": "Sole *Eve*, Associate sole, to me beyond / Compare above all living Creatures deare" (227-8), "Daughter of God and Man, immortal *Eve*, / For such thou art, from sin and blame entire" (291-2). Only in the "fervor" of his final response does he finally imitate Eve's brevity with "O Woman" (343). Eve, on the other hand, opens with a complimentary address only once in the entire episode, responding to the courtesy of Adam's first response with the single line "Ofspring of Heav'n and Earth, and all Earths Lord" (273). In her two subsequent responses, she does not employ a vocative at all: "If this be our condition . . . " (321) and "With thy permission then . . . " (377). Eve initially cites as her reason for wishing to separate that they talk too much—"what wonder if so near / Looks intervene and smiles, or object new / Casual discourse draw on, which intermits / Our dayes work brought to little" (221-224)—and the

comparative terseness with which she engages in debate certainly suggests that she is a woman wishing to get to work.

One consequence of such a diminution of, if not *courtesy*, at least patience for "Casual discourse" is that Eve temporarily prevents both discussion and what is for Milton synonymous with *reason*—the ability to choose, "reason also is choice" (III.108). After noting the "wanton growth" of the Garden and their inability to check that growth, Eve asks Adam to *advise*, only to rush quickly into stating her own opinion before Adam has a chance to respond: "thou therefore now advise / Or hear what to my minde first thoughts present" (212-3). Her comment appears to offer Adam the choice of either *advising* or *hearing*, but she clearly makes the choice for him, as she does a moment later when suggesting what their division of labors should be:

> Let us divide our labours, thou where choice
> Leads thee, or where most needs, whether to wind
> The Woodbine round this Arbour, or direct
> The clasping Ivie where to climb, while I
> In yonder Spring of Roses intermixt
> With myrtle, find what to redress till Noon. . . .
> (214-19)

Christopher Ricks has said that Eve "doesn't care what he does, and she knows very well what she will do" (144, cited in Fowler 451*n*216-9), but I believe that Eve's proposal indicates that she does care what Adam does and is, indeed, eager to tell him what to do. She appears to be offering Adam a choice here: "thou where choice / Leads thee," but the coordinate "or where most needs" suggests a manipulation of which Eve is probably not even consciously aware. Though she is willing to grant him the freedom of doing whatever he prefers to do, it is clear that Eve would rather he do what must be done: "whether to wind / The Woodbine

round this Arbour, or direct / The clasping Ivie where to climb." She, on the other hand, states but one possibility for herself, whether it is pressing or not: she intends to spend her time among the roses and look for something to do: "find what to redress."

Adam's "mild answer" to Eve's suggestion shows clearly that he is hardly inclined to the notion of diminishing their "Casual discourse." In dramatic contrast to the abrupt brevity of each of Eve's speeches, Adam develops his responses slowly and thoroughly, taking time to preface each of his refutations with a complimentary address and couching his remarks with deliberate care to avoid offending Eve. As a consequence, each of his responses is almost twice as long as the speech it is refuting. If prolixity signals the obfuscation of deceptive rhetoric in the postlapsarian world of Comus and Dalila, it is the result of both courtesy and a thorough account of the facts in the "Casual discourse" of paradise. Though refuting the basic premises of her argument, Adam compliments Eve's reasoning and even suggests more logical points that could strengthen her position.

In a striking departure from the usual Miltonic refutation, Adam opens his rebuttal by strongly praising both the reasoning and the intentions of his "opponent": "Well hast thou motion'd, well thy thoughts imployd" (229). Though disagreeing with the reasons she has given for their separation, he praises what he assumes is her motive for wishing greater efficiency in their daily labor: "For nothing lovelier can be found / In Woman, then to studie houshold good, / And good workes in her Husband to promote" (232-4). It is an excellent instance of the separation in "true eloquence" of the speaker from the speech. While Milton usually shows disputants to use their orations as personal attacks on their respondents as though the fallacy of their arguments reflected a corruption of their soul, Adam deliberately divides what he perceives to be the error of Eve's reasoning from the purity of its in-

tent. She has *meant* well and is to be commended for the effort regardless of the merit of the argument itself.

When Adam finally does turn to his refutation, he continues the "mildness" with which his response has begun. Indeed, Adam does not actually deny the basic truth of what Eve has presented as her reasons for separating. It is true that their proximity leads to "smiles" and "Casual discourse" that "intermits / [Their] dayes work." Where Eve has been mistaken is her overemphasis on the importance of that work and her slighting of the "smiles" and "Casual discourse" that get in the way of that work. Adam suggests that they are actually much more important than the work, which "not so strictly hath our Lord impos'd" (235). Like the industrious Martha of the New Testament, who "was cumbered about much serving" and complained when her sister Mary chose to listen to Jesus instead of helping her out (Lk. 10:38-42), Eve mistakenly assumes that God prefers their days in Eden to be filled more with work than with "Casual discourse." One remembers that she is quick to excuse herself in Book VIII to putter away in her garden when Raphael and Adam turn to after-dinner conversation and "studious thoughts abstruse." While this indicates an admirable devotion to "houshold good," Adam reminds Eve that their minds need refreshment as much as their bodies, and "sweet intercourse" is nothing less than "Food of the mind" (238). Moreover, the ability to smile, "To brute deni'd," not only is evidence of their reason and humanity but is "of Love the food, / Love not the lowest end of human life" (239-41). What Adam refutes, then, is not Eve's basic claim that their working together is somewhat counterproductive, but the basic assumption that they were put in Eden primarily to work: "For not to irksom toile, but to delight / He made us, and delight to Reason joyn'd" (242-3).

Once Adam has refuted her reason for wishing to separate, he surprisingly offers Eve a more legitimate reason, the logic of

which he will accept:

> But if much converse perhaps
> Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield.
> For solitude somtimes is best societie,
> And short retirement urges sweet returne.
> (247-50)

Though Raphael has remarked that human reason is chiefly "Discursive," in contrast with the "Intuitive" (*noetic* or *axiomatic*) reason of the angels (V.487-90), Joan Bennett is surely right in seeing Adam's reason in this debate as largely noetic, a higher form of perception that largely escapes the discursive reason of Eve (398).[2] In his limited exposure to God and Raphael, he has already begun to intuit the relations between general axioms and his daily affairs. Eve has apparently not thought of the fact that solitude is a good in itself and is able to enhance the enjoyment of subsequent companionship, but Adam immediately perceives it and offers it against his own desire that they remain together. Far from debating the issue, Adam illustrates that the purpose of discourse should be a mutual desire for the truth; if he can find a more logical reason for doing as Eve has suggested, he will argue for rather than against her position. What this shows us most dramatically is that Adam is not arguing against the idea of separation itself; rather, he is simply asking that that separation be for the right reason.

No sooner has he suggested this reason, however, than he remembers Raphael's warning of the danger of Satan:

> But other doubt possesses me, least harm
> Befall thee sever'd from me; for thou knowst
> What hath bin warn'd us, what malicious Foe
> Envying our happiness, and of his own

> Despairing, seeks to work us woe and shame
> By sly assault. . . . (251-6)

Once again we see a radical departure from standard debate, a reminder that discourse is an *examination* of preconceptions rather than a defense of a fixed position. What Mary Ann Radzinowicz has explained of the absence of stichomythia in *Samson Agonistes*, "that 'thrust and parry' is an instrument of debate only between fixed and preestablished positions; it is not an instrument of intellectual discovery" (17), applies to Adam's entire approach in his debate with Eve, in which his intention is merely to examine the issue, not to cross disputational swords. Adam clearly does not remember Raphael's warning until halfway into his remarks; yet as soon as he does, he immediately checks himself and reverses his opinion.

One of the most notable differences between Milton's prelapsarian discourse and demonic debate is that the former suggests a certain spontaneity of thought, an organic development of argument in directions of which the speaker is himself unaware when he begins his oration. When Adam first considers Eve's argument, he is struck by its skill and is moved by what he takes to be her motives. He immediately intuits the fallacy of her reasoning but is willing to suggest a better argument for the same end, until another thought occurs that compels him to change his mind. Unlike the mechanical respondent obliged to refute an argument regardless of its merit, Adam shows himself not to know *what* he feels about their separation until his "right reason" leads him inevitably to what he remembers of Raphael's warning. With the danger again in mind, Adam's quickly intuits other axioms more relevant to their particular situation: they are more vulnerable "asunder" (258), and "The Wife, where danger or dishonour lurks, / Safest and seemliest by her Husband staies" (267-8).

Milton's prefaces Eve's response with our first note of discord between the two. She responds "As one who loves, and some unkindness meets, / With sweet austeer composure thus reply'd" (271-2). The shift in tone is subtle; the general congeniality remains in that she responds "As one who loves," and her composure is "sweet" if "austeer." Indeed, for the only time in the debate, she follows Adam's example of prefacing her refutation with a complimentary address. And yet it is also apparent that she is unable to emulate his ability to detach the speaker from the speech, for she takes his response quite personally, as one who "some unkindness meets" (271). Adam has been anything but unkind in his response, which has been courteous and flattering to both Eve and her proposal. Her ability to reason syllogistically, however, leads her quickly to dissect Adam's axiom and find lurking within what she assumes to be an insult to the strength of her faith and love.

Ironically, Eve's very success as a logician works against her in the debate, for she assumes that conclusions reached logically are necessarily true. She has yet to learn the limitations of discursive reason. Adam has offered the simple axiom that there is strength in unity, greater vulnerability in division; yet Eve quickly deduces that Adam's concern for her safety cannot be from physical danger, since they currently appear to be either immortal or capable of withstanding any threats to their lives: "As wee, not capable of death or paine, / Can either not receave, or can repell" (283-4). This leaves her with the logical, if incorrect, conclusion that Adam fears her mental or spiritual strength insufficient to resist deception: "His fraud is then thy fear, which plain inferrs / Thy equal fear that my firm Faith and Love / Can by his fraud be shak'n or seduc't" (285-7).

The danger of her reasoning is that she bases her refutation on *inference*, rather than on any explicit statement of this concern.

stood his motive, which has been simply to avoid Satan's attempt altogether, which in itself would be offensive in the mere suggestion that the tempted was not "incorruptible of Faith" (298). Far from assuming Eve's weakness, Adam has thought that she "with scorne / And anger wouldst resent the offer'd wrong / Though ineffectual found" (299-301). Since Adam argues noetically through much of the debate, he risks the fact that she may misunderstand the unspoken connections, that she may not only misread the writing between the lines but supply her own version.

It is interesting to note the difference between each's perception of the other. Adam has shown himself in each response to assume naturally the best of motives behind Eve's proposal. Though she has not stated as much, he immediately assumes that she is motivated by concern for "houshold good" and the desire to encourage her husband to do "good workes" (234), and he now asserts that she is blameless and would surely render any attempt to seduce her "ineffectual." Eve, on the other hand, has immediately assumed the worst of her husband, being quick to denounce his assumed estimation of her despite what he has proven daily of that esteem.

Adam indicates that Eve also has dismissed the danger of Satan as hastily as she has misinterpreted himself. Reminding her that "The Enemie" has seduced a third of heaven—"Suttle he needs must be, who could seduce / Angels" (307-8)—Adam himself claims to enjoy the benefit of external aid against such a foe: "nor think superflous others aid. / I from the influence of thy looks receave / Access in every Vertue" (309-310). It appears to be an effective ethical appeal, an honest admission of his own vulnerability to make Eve feel that he is not arguing from a sense of his own superiority, but is, rather, asking her to be no more dependent than he is himself. Joan Bennett has argued that Adam wants "a greater sense of interdependence, a more complete security in his relation-

stood his motive, which has been simply to avoid Satan's attempt altogether, which in itself would be offensive in the mere suggestion that the tempted was not "incorruptible of Faith" (298). Far from assuming Eve's weakness, Adam has thought that she "with scorne / And anger wouldst resent the offer'd wrong / Though ineffectual found" (299-301). Since Adam argues noetically through much of the debate, he risks the fact that she may misunderstand the unspoken connections, that she may not only misread the writing between the lines but supply her own version.

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ship with his beloved, than is possible to rationally free creatures" (398), but Adam's position is consistent with what Milton has said elsewhere about the reason for Eve's creation. God tells Adam in Book VIII that she will be "Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self" (450), a position which Milton echoes in *De Doctrina* (I.x): "God gave a wife to man at the beginning to the intent that she should be his help and solace and delight" (*Complete Prose Works*, VI.374). In wishing Eve to remain with him so that they may help each other, Adam is wanting her to do nothing more than the purpose for which she was created.

Though Eve responds with the continued courtesy of "accent sweet" (321), she persists in her belief that Adam "Less attributed to her Faith sincere" (320). As is clear throughout *Paradise Lost*, at the heart of the fall of both angels and humans in Milton's universe lies the sin of pride, which we find first with Eve in this insistence that Adam is undervaluing the strength of her faith. Just as Satan rebels out of a "sense of injur'd merit," Eve holds staunchly to her desire to separate chiefly because of hurt feelings. Adam has assured her in his second response that he has the highest esteem for her faith, and yet she continues to misinterpret Adam's real intention. It does not appear to matter what assurances he gives her—she has concluded that Adam does not think highly enough of her faith, and she is largely deaf to anything further he may have to say on the subject.

Waldock and others have noted that Eve's second rebuttal strongly echoes Milton's own dismissal of a "fugitive and cloistered virtue" in *Areopagitica* (22), for the central question of her response is "what is Faith, Love, Vertue unassaid / Alone, without exterior help sustaind?" (335-6). Fowler is surely right, however, in noting that a legitimate argument in the fallen world of 1644 is hardly so appropriate in prelapsarian Eden, where virtue is not defined by the ability to resist temptation (456*n*335). Indeed,

Fowler suggests that, in attributing his own earlier sentiments to Eve, Milton appears, "in the interests of self-discovery," to be examining his own "dangerous individualism" (456*n*335). In the context of this rebuttal, Eve's individualism is not only dangerous but potentially blasphemous, for it leads her to suggest that paradise as Adam has described it is ultimately deficient: "How are we happie, still in fear of harm?" (326). If fear of Satan compells the two to live "In narrow circuit strait'nd by a Foe" (323), Eden is more a prison than a paradise. According to Eve, Adam's account of the danger implies that Eden has been "Left so imperfet by the Maker wise," that "Fraile is our happiness, if this be so, / And *Eden* were no *Eden* thus expos'd" (338-41).

Eve also refutes Adam's claim that the mere attempt by Satan to seduce her would be an affront, since "his foul esteeme / Sticks no dishonour on our Front, but turns / Foul on himself" (329-31). Indeed, Eve argues that honor, rather, could result from the test: "who rather double honour gaine / From his surmise prov'd false, find peace within, / Favour from Heav'n" (332-4). In contrast with the Son in Books III and VI, who wants nothing more than to augment God's glory, Eve shows herself to be interested only in enhancing her own position, working for "double honour" for herself rather than glory for God. Milton shows us that, even before being tempted by Satan with godlike knowledge and power, Eve is concerned primarily with her own self-image. She resents any implication from Adam that she may be vulnerable to Satan's deception and is eager for the glory she would receive in proving him wrong.

Adam's third and final response to Eve is the only occasion in the debate when he has no complimentary address, as he hastily refutes Eve's implication that he has said anything critical of God's design: "best are all things as the will / Of God ordain'd them" (343-4). With a critical shift from his earlier courtesy to the

harsh "O Woman," Adam indicates his own fervor to refute any suggestion belittling God's creation. Of course, this confirms, rather than refutes, Eve's own suggestion that there has been "Nothing imperfect or deficient left" in either man or "aught that might his happie State secure" (345-7). What Eve continues to overlook, however, is that "God left free the Will" (351), which guarantees their freedom but also makes them vulnerable to the deception of another. Having never been exposed to mendacity, Eve does not comprehend the possibility of hypocrisy:

> Since Reason not impossibly may meet
> Some specious object by the Foe subornd,
> And fall into deception unaware,
> Not keeping strictest watch, as she was warnd.
> (360-3)

By assuming her power sufficient to resist any evil, Eve is clearly not "keeping strictest watch," a state of readiness that would not allow such prideful confidence.

Resorting again to axioms, Adam reminds Eve that "Trial will come unsought" and that "constancie" is best proven by obedience: "th' other who can know, / Not seeing thee attempted, who attest?" (366-9). Adam notes the contradiction in what Eve has suggested of the "double honour" of resisting Satan. While wanting the glory of a solitary resistance to temptation, she paradoxically is also hoping for a heavenly audience that will observe her.

Having once again refuted Eve's reasons for wishing to separate, Adam suggests a more logical motive for her suggestion, while subtly indicating Eve's overconfidence: "But if thou think, trial unsought may finde / Us both securer then thus warnd thou seemst, / Go" (370-2). It is the moment for which Eve has been waiting, as she quickly responds, for the first time, that Adam is right, "that our trial, when least sought, / May finde us both perhaps farr less prepar'd" (381-2). On the surface, it appears that this

prelapsarian debate concludes in agreement, but this is merely the face that Eve puts on the affair. Adam asserts even in his closing response what he maintains throughout the debate, that temptation should be avoided, which "Were better, and most likelie if from mee / Thou sever not" (364-6). He has made clear what his own feelings and desires are, but is unwilling to demand that she stay, "for [her] stay, not free, absents [her] more" (372). The only consensus reached in this critical debate, then, is that Eve will have her own way.

While differing widely in their reasons for thinking so, modern critics have generally agreed that Adam's great failure as a prelapsarian "disputant" lies in his inability to persuade Eve in this critical separation scene. In her discussion of the scene and its relation to Milton's antinomianism (1983), Joan Bennett summarized the development of modern responses to the separation, all of which share the belief that Adam is, in one respect or another, at fault. E. M. W. Tillyard claimed over forty years ago that Adam's entire problem is in arguing the matter at all with Eve, who really is merely waiting for him to put his masculine foot down and demand that she stay with him (17-19). Some twenty years later, Dennis Burden argued that Adam has to be in some way culpable so that they can both be responsible for the Fall (86ff). Noting Samson's remark that "Commands are no constraints," Fredson Bowers and Anthony Low each argued as well that Adam should have laid down the law with Eve and left it to her free will to decide whether to obey his commands or not. More recently, however, such critics as Diane McColley and Stella Revard have objected that such readings diminish Eve as an independent, rational individual, who must be allowed to go if she is to be truly free. Though agreeing with this basic premise, Bennett has argued that

> Adam fails as Eve's governor when he lets her go, because by giving his permission when he does, he substitutes his own authority for a truly free decision from her. (399)

I would argue, however, that, having developed his powers of reason in his earlier encounters with Raphael and God, Adam actually does much better in this debate than any of these readings would suggest. He is not *victorious* in the sense of persuading his "opponent," but this is not a valid measure of success in either debate or, most especially, the context of this scene. Eve *is* an independent, rational being allowed to accept or reject Adam's argument, and the fact that she is not persuaded merely confirms that freedom; it does not indicate any failure on Adam's part. Bennett places the blame chiefly on his seeming to grant permission rather than leaving the decision to Eve, but she arrives at this conclusion by what I believe to be an undue emphasis on the seemingly imperative "Go" at the close of his remarks. What her analysis ignores is the conditional adverb clause that modifies *Go*: "But if thou think, trial unsought may finde / Us both securer then thus warnd thou seemst, / Go . . . " (370-2). The only thing truly imperative about this remark is that she must decide for herself and act upon what she thinks is best: "But if thou think. . . ." Adam has presented his reasons for thinking they should remain together and now leaves it to Eve to make her own decision.

Bennett also argues that Adam concedes to Eve's wishes too soon, that he lacks "the rhetorician's patience . . . to bring her to the point where . . . his reasons enable her reason to understand the whole picture" (400), but I would argue that Adam presents his case as thoroughly as possible without badgering Eve. He gives her as comprehensive an argument as she needs to make the "right" decision, and he can hardly be blamed when she does not, any more than can Raphael's instruction be faulted for Adam's

subsequent mistakes. In both cases, Milton shows that the blame must rest entirely with the person who, exercising his or her own free will and reason on a sufficient account of the facts, simply makes the wrong choice.

Notes

[1] For earlier scenes in which "Adam's right to the initiative seems insisted on," see V.17ff and IV.408-10 (Fowler 450n204).

[2] Milton draws a distinction between the two types of reasoning in his Art of Logic, in which syllogistic logic is said to said to have arisen "from the weakness of the human intellect":

> Such . . . deduction has arisen from the weakness of the human intellect, which because it is not able by the first intuition to see the truth and falsity of things in the axiom, turns to the syllogism in order to judge of their consequence and lack of consequence by its means. (*Works* XI.367)

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