

The Epic Decision: From Homer to Milton

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Abstract Milton's *Paradise Lost* draws upon the classical epic tradition, while seeking to revise it in Christian terms. Adam's tragic choice in Book IX is modeled on Achilles' in Homer's *Iliad*. Achilles chooses to live a short but heroic life rather than a long but inglorious life. Confronted with Eve's transgression in Book IX, Adam makes a similar choice—to join Eve in sin and thereby expose himself to the possibility of death. Following the Bible, Milton must present this act negatively as a fall, but he nevertheless portrays Adam's decision in epic terms and hence as heroic. Viewing Milton's characters in light of Hegel's theory of recognition in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* helps to analyze the ways in which Eve and Adam seek to establish their autonomy as human beings. In Hegel's—and Milton's—terms, they cannot be fully human until they leave the sheltered, animal-like state of Eden and risk death. In line with Milton's claim in *Areopagitica*—"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue"—his notion of the fortunate fall is fundamentally Protestant. What appears to be Adam's turn away from God turns out to be a heroic path toward a new spirituality, a path of Protestant struggle.

Key words tragic choice; epic tradition; fortunate fall; recognition; human self-consciousness

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For nature had now driven him [Adam] from the safe and harmless state of childhood—a garden, as it were, which looked after his needs without any trouble on his part ([Genesis] 3:23)—into the wide world, where so many cares, troubles, and unforeseen ills awaited him. In the future, the wretchedness of his condition would often arouse in him the wish for a paradise, the creation of his imagination, where he could dream or while away his existence in quiet inactivity and permanent peace. But between him and that imagined place of bliss, restless reason would interpose itself, irresistibly impelling him to develop the faculties implanted within him.

—Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History"¹

In Book 18 of the *Iliad* the first epic hero, Achilles, makes a decision that defines him as a human being and sets the mark for all other Greeks to reach for. Achilles, the greatest Achaean warrior, a man who can single-handedly change the outcome of the Trojan War, is presented with a tragic choice—he must choose between two goods.² He has just been informed that his dear friend, Patroclus, a man "I loved

beyond all other comrades, / loved as my own life" (*Iliad*, 18: 95 – 96), has been killed at the hand of Hector, the Trojan prince.³ Achilles sits mourning with his mother by his side and must decide whether to return to battle and avenge Patroclus's death, or pack up his things and return to his homeland of Phthia. If he chooses to return to battle, his mother warns him,

You're doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say! For hard on the heels of Hector's death your death Must come at once. (*Iliad*, 18: 111 – 113)

On the other hand, if Achilles chooses to leave Troy and return to Phthia, he will live a long, prosaic life pasturing horses. If he leaves, he will more than likely have all the comforts of a quiet life—a plot of land, a garden, horses, a wife and children, and, in a sense, happiness—but he will be forgotten. Achilles' choice is clear—either live a long mundane life or a short glorious one. His reply to his mother may be seen as more than just Achilles's personal decision. One could argue that it is the standard to which all ancient Greeks were supposed to look for guidance in their own lives—a gospel of antiquity. The warrior culture for which Homer wrote his epic must reply just as their heroic ancestor did: "Then let me die at once" (*Iliad*, 18: 114).

The epic is more than just a story written to entertain audiences. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not merely derivatives of the ancient Greek warrior culture; they are the source out of which classical culture emerged. The "epic shows a tendency to become a 'scripture' of its culture. Such a poem is in fact not so much a cultural production as a cultural producer."⁴ Therefore, Achilles's tragic choice becomes the guiding light for the heroes of the classical world. They are expected to choose to win honor fighting in faraway battles over living a quiet life at home. It is for their culture the noble choice, the morally right choice—what the gods expect of them.

A choice that defines a culture in the epic is not limited to Homer. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas must make a similarly difficult decision. He must decide whether to leave his lover, Dido, and the comforts of Carthage to continue his journey to found Rome. Aeneas must choose between love and Roman piety. Naturally, setting the mark for Roman citizens, Virgil has his hero abandon Dido. This decision is in line with Rome's expectation that its citizens will place patriotism over personal satisfaction and glory. Still, Virgil does not present it as an easy or emotionless choice for his hero. Aeneas is a torn man when he leaves Dido:

But though he longs to soften, soothe her sorrow
and turn aside her troubles with sweet words,
though groaning long and shaken in his mind
because of his great love, nevertheless
pious Aeneas carries out the gods'
instructions. Now he turns back to his fleet.⁵

In the Dido episode Virgil, in effect, writes the scripture that Roman citizens should adhere to—in the Roman Empire duty and piety come before personal ambition and e-

motion.

When one turns to *Paradise Lost*, one would expect to find an epic decision comparable to the ones in *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*. Milton was consciously trying to fit his poem into the epic tradition, but he was also adapting it to new, Christian purposes. *Paradise Lost* should thus feature a scene where the hero has to choose between God and some other value, and in Christian terms that other value should be seen as lesser. In *The Iliad*, Achilles, in accordance with the classical warrior culture, chooses a hero's death over a shepherd's life, and in *The Aeneid*, Aeneas chooses to found Rome in accordance with Roman piety and civic-mindedness rather than enjoy life with Dido. One would naturally expect, then, that in a Christian epic Milton would have a hero piously choose God's will over some other value in accordance with Christian teaching, which prescribes always choosing the path that leads to God. To a large extent Milton fulfills this expectation in *Paradise Lost*. One of the heroes of Milton's epic is the seraph Abdiel. At the end of Book V, he has to choose between following Satan's lead in rebellion or remaining loyal to God. Milton presents Abdiel as consciously choosing God over Satan and thus piety over personal glory: "Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified/ His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal" (V. 899 – 900).⁶ In Book III, Milton offers another model of the hero when the Son of God courageously is willing to sacrifice himself and risk death so that the will of God may be fulfilled.

But things look different when one turns to the heart of *Paradise Lost*—the story of Adam and Eve, the Fall of Man. The opening of Book IX is one of the places where Milton most self-consciously aligns himself with the epic tradition, and it is the one place where he invokes the concept of tragedy: "I now must change/ Those notes to tragic" (IX. 5 – 6). It is no doubt intentional that this tragic moment is in the same location in the narrative as Achilles's tragic choice: Milton places Adam's tragic choice in the ninth book of a twelve-book epic, and Homer's Achilles makes his decision in the eighteenth book of a twenty-four-book epic. But unlike Homer's Achilles, Milton's Adam seems to make a choice that goes against the moral code of conduct Milton is supposedly championing in his epic. The question is, then, why does Milton have his hero turn his back on God and deliberately disobey His commandment in order to eat from the Tree of Knowledge and fall with his wife, Eve? Why does Milton have Adam abandon God and not Eve (as if Aeneas had abandoned Rome and not Dido)? The immediate answer to this question is of course that this is how the events unfold in Genesis, and Milton is committed to the Biblical text.⁷ But the question remains: How did Milton interpret this Biblical account? Although he does not contradict it, he does elaborate upon it and explores the motives of Adam and Eve at much greater length than the Bible does. In the process, Milton gives his own interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, one which may not be wholly orthodox.

Analyzing the choices Adam and Eve make will help us understand Milton's deeper intentions in writing his great Christian epic. By having Adam choose to fall with Eve and portraying his decision in the noblest possible terms, Milton seems to depart from orthodox interpretations of the Fall and offer his own, personal understanding of good versus evil, right versus wrong, and moral versus immoral. Like the classical

epics that came before it, *Paradise Lost* seeks to play an active, not a passive role in its culture. It does not simply reflect traditional Christian teaching, but attempts to reinterpret it and set out on a new path. In short, *Paradise Lost* is in Nohrn-berg's terms a "cultural producer," meant to be a "scripture" for future generations. The ultimate goal of Milton's Christian epic is to show readers a new and better path to spiritual enlightenment. At first it appears that the fall of Adam and Eve pulls them away from God. But in Milton's reinterpretation of the story, the Fall truly is a 'fortunate fall' and ultimately sets Adam and Eve on the path to fulfilling the destiny God has in mind for them—a very Protestant destiny, as we shall see.

Adam's tragic choice is much like that of Achilles in the *Iliad*.⁸ When Adam returns from his day's labor, he finds out that Eve has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and he "Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill/ Ran through his veins, and all his joints relaxed" (IX. 890 – 891). Adam understands immediately the consequences of Eve's transgression. He is horrified because he knows that Eve is now doomed—the only question that remains for him is whether or not he can live without his beautiful wife. Like Achilles, Adam now has the choice between two destinies. He may obey God's commandment, refuse to eat from the Tree, and therefore abandon Eve. If he chooses this path, he will never die and live life in the comfort and security of Eden—just as Achilles would have lived a tranquil life in Phthia. On the other hand, if he decides that he cannot possibly live without Eve and eats the forbidden fruit, he will live what many would regard as a short but glorious life sacrificing himself for the woman he loves. Adam's decision is no less heroic than the one Achilles makes when he decides to return to battle, since the consequences of each are essentially the same.

Milton's hero snaps out of his inward silence and comes to the conclusion:

Certain my resolution is to die;
 How can I live without thee, how forgo
 Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined,
 To live again in these wild woods forlorn?
 Should God create another Eve, and I
 Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
 Would never from my heart; no no, I feel
 The link of nature draw me; flesh of flesh,
 Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
 Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (IX. 907 – 916)

Adam does not hesitate when he realizes that he must choose between God and Eve. Living a cloistered life in the comforts of Eden without his wife is unacceptable to him. Adam needs Eve to be a complete human being; Adam needs Eve in the same way Achilles needs Troy. Achilles cannot become fully himself without risking his life in battle, as James Nohrnberg argues:

Achilles needs Troy in the way that a “bonus baby” needs the Big Leagues or the world champion needs the National Association of Boxing; he may want it on his own terms, but he cannot do without it. Achilles asserts that he has an alternative back in horse-pasturing Phthia; but like the pastoral scenes depicted in many of Homer’s epic similes, the alternative is only hypothetically there. Entertaining ideas about an alternate self is of course part of self-consciousness as a whole, but a totally self-invented life would be quixotic at the least, if not just plain mad.⁹

For Adam too, the thought of life without Eve is only hypothetically there. While Achilles needs Troy the way an athlete needs a playing field, one could say that Adam needs Eve the way a chivalric knight needs a damsel in distress. Choosing to fall with Eve forces Adam to ‘become a man.’ The Fall itself is fortunate because it enables Adam and Eve to become fully human. Achilles is an incomplete character until he returns to battle knowing that he will die shortly after he kills Hector. Likewise, Adam and Eve are incomplete human beings until they choose to reject the easy-going life in Eden and step out into a world of challenge and obstacles. They basically spend most of their time gathering food, eating, and sleeping—one might describe them as grazing like cattle. There are no obstacles to overcome or challenges in Eden. In the prelapsarian world Adam and Eve are not fully human—they are not recognizably different from the rest of the animal kingdom. By aligning Adam’s choice to fall with Achilles’ choice to return to battle, Milton sets up this point. The Fall completes the creation of man—the Fall makes man fully human.

This conception is not a pure creation of Milton’s imagination. He appears to have taken the idea out of the story’s original source—Genesis. In Chapter 3 of Genesis, God questions Adam and Eve about why they ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam is quick to pass the buck, blaming Eve for giving him the fruit and God for giving him Eve. Likewise, Eve quickly points her finger at the serpent, saying, “the serpent beguiled me and I ate” (Genesis 3: 13).¹⁰ At this point Adam and Eve have both disobeyed God and failed to take the blame for their actions—they have fallen out of the grace of God and lost their place in Eden. One would expect God to turn immediately to their punishment. But instead, God first deals with the serpent.

Because you have done this,
 Cursed be you
 of all cattle and all beasts of the field.
 On your belly shall you go
 and dust shall you eat all the days of your life.
 Enmity will I set between you and the woman,
 between your seed and hers.
 He will boot your head
 and you will bite his heel. (Genesis 3: 14 – 15)

This passage can easily be glossed over as merely the punishment God inflicts on the

serpent for his part in tempting Eve into eating the fruit. But if we think about it for a second, it should seem a bit odd and inappropriate. Why should a human being reading Genesis care how the snake is being punished as result of the Fall?

The answer to this question is that the serpent's punishment is included not so that we understand why farmers stomp on the heads of snakes in the field, but instead to highlight the first distinction between animals and humans in Genesis. Robert Alter points out that "it is the first moment in which a split between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is recorded."¹¹ Milton takes this Biblical moment very seriously in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. Just as in the original source, in Milton's epic, Adam and Eve are not separated from the rest of the animal kingdom until they disobey God's commandment and fall out of His grace. The question is, then, what is it about the nature of the Fall that makes Adam and Eve fully human? What is it that they do that makes them intrinsically separate from the "fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts" (Genesis 3: 26)? To answer this question it will be helpful to use Hegel's theory of recognition to explain Adam and Eve's transformation. It may seem odd to interpret a seventeenth-century English epic in the terms of a nineteenth-century German philosopher. But in the opening of his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Hegel gives an account of the origin of human self-consciousness. He is in effect telling the story of man's "fall" from his original state—how he left a state of ignorance or "innocence" and entered a state of self-consciousness. Thus as foreign as Hegel's terms may seem to *Paradise Lost*, he is actually dealing with similar material. His analysis can help us to understand the meaning of the Fall in Milton.¹²

Hegel's "first man" shares with the animals certain basic natural desires, such as the desire for food, for sleep, for shelter, and above all for the preservation of his own life. Adam and Eve, before the Fall, live an existence that does not extend beyond these natural desires. What distinguishes man from all other animals, according to Hegel, is that he desires more than just real, "positive" objects—a flower or a neatly kept garden—he also desires objects that are totally non-material. Man above all desires the desire of other men, that is, to be admired by others or to be recognized. For Hegel, an individual cannot become self-conscious, that is, become aware of himself as a separate human being, without being recognized by other human beings. Man's sense of self-worth and identity is intimately connected with the value that other people place on him. While animals exhibit social behavior, this behavior is instinctual and is based on the mutual satisfaction of natural needs. Humans, on the other hand, have social behavior that can be explained only by the fact that they crave recognition. Achilles stormed the Trojan army so that his virtues would be praised by people throughout history—he chose to die because he knew that he would be recognized as the greatest warrior who ever lived. It was his desire for recognition that made him strive to be stronger, faster, and fiercer than anyone else—it is what distinguished him from the masses. It is this same desire that fuels Eve's choice to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve, in Book IX, is searching desperately for a way to distinguish herself, to have Adam recognize her talents and virtues. Up to this point, it could be argued, Adam, while he loves and is immensely attracted to Eve, does not fully appreciate or recognize her as separate from himself. Eve must get him to

recognize that their existence in Eden cannot be based simply on their mutual satisfaction of needs. What Eve wants Adam to understand is that just because she has been created out of his rib, they are not the same being—they are not “enjoined” (IX: 207), but individuals. By the beginning of Book IX Eve can no longer live as a “pair” with Adam. She needs to find an outlet to express her individuality. In order to do this she must find a way to sever herself from Adam’s constant companionship. She cannot be recognized for individual accomplishments if she is doing everything as a team with Adam.

At the beginning of Book IX Eve suggests that she and Adam separate—divide the labor—in the hope of accomplishing more work. This is her first opportunity to show that she is capable of doing a task on her own, but before she can do this she must convince Adam to separate from her for the day. Her conversation with Adam is well-planned and rhetorically smooth. She begins to show one of her individual virtues—rhetorical skill—before she even splits from Adam.

Adam, well may we labour still to dress
This garden, still to tend plant, herb and flower.
Our pleasant task enjoined but till more hands
Aid us, the work under our labour grows. (IX. 205 – 208)

Eve lets Adam know right away that she is planning to separate from him. She addresses him by name, dropping her previous rhetoric, in which she often referred to herself as an extension of Adam. Book IV offers a good example of the self-deprecating way Eve viewed her relationship with Adam in the past:

To whom thus Eve replied, O thou for whom
And from whom I was formed flesh of thy flesh,
And without whom am to no end, my guide
And head, what thou hast said is just and right. (IV. 440 – 443)

Earlier in Milton’s epic Eve thought of herself as part of Adam—inseparable—and the manner in which she addresses him illustrates this belief. By Book IX this is no longer the case. She calls him by his individual name and does not suggest that they are physically the same being.¹³ Eve then goes on to explain her plan:

Or hear what to my mind first thoughts present,
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 ivy where to climb, while I
In yonder spring of roses intermixed
With myrtle, find what to redress till noon. (IX. 214 – 219)

Eve suggests that Adam work on a new method to prop up vines in the garden while

she looks for the best way to prop up flowers. In her search to find a way to distinguish herself, Eve does the most natural thing—she organizes a competition to see who will arrive at noon with the best new gardening technique. Since gardening is all she knows, it is quite natural that the competition she thinks up involves tending to plants. Eve is trying desperately to bring a little action and excitement into Eden, to come up with some task that will result in a winner who will be recognized as doing better work.

Ultimately, the best way to prove her individual virtues is to spend the day alone and fend off the devil's temptations on her own. If she is able to avoid the danger that lies in the garden, then she believes she will be recognized as a capable individual. In search of recognition Eve successfully convinces Adam to work alone. Eve leaves Adam's side ready to do battle with an evil spirit. Eve claims, "Frail is our happiness, if this be so, / And Eden were no Eden thus exposed" (IX. 340–341). She cannot be happy unless she is challenged individually—unless she is given the chance to fight on her own. In her own way, Eve resembles Achilles storming out of the Achaean camp. She is well aware that if she lives a passive and comfortable life, her virtue is meaningless and she will go on forever unnoticed. She asks herself how virtue can be good if it is never tested. Like Achilles, Eve needs a challenge and an enemy. But Eve finds that the enemy and the battle she must fight are more complex than anything Achilles faces. The Trojan army attacks Achilles with swords and spears—weapons against which Achilles can defend himself. By contrast, Satan launches his attack against Eve with praise and flattery. Satan attacks Eve with exactly what she wants to hear. He recognizes her as an individual who is worthy of praise. Satan's barrage of acclaim and appreciation of Eve is so flawlessly in line with what she desires to hear that it has been suggested that it is Eve as much as Satan, who actually ventriloquizes the serpent:¹⁴

Wonder not, sovereign mistress, if perhaps
 Thou canst, who art sole wonder, much less arm
 Thy looks, the heaven of mildness, with disdain,
 . . .
 Fairest resemblance of thy maker fair,
 Thee all things living gaze on, all things thine
 By gift, and thy celestial beauty adore
 With ravishment beheld, there best beheld
 Where universally admired; but here
 In this enclosure wild, these beasts among,
 Beholders rude, and shallow to discern
 Half what in thee is fair, one man except,
 Who sees thee? (and what is one?) who shouldst be seen
 A goddess among gods, adored and served
 By angels numberless, thy daily train. (IX. 532–534, 538–548)

Satan delivers to Eve exactly what she has set out to find—individual recognition. He

addresses her as the “sovereign” mistress and goes on to praise her beauty, saying that she deserves to be “universally admired.” The serpent makes Eve feel like a “goddess,” an “Empress,” “Queen of this universe” (IX. 568, 684). Satan’s repeated use of the language of sovereignty reveals what is really on Eve’s mind. She would like to switch positions with Adam and rule over him for a change. When she hears Satan call her “Fairest resemblance of thy maker fair,” she must be smiling to herself. For once someone thinks her superior to Adam. Once the serpent has successfully won Eve over by recognizing her virtues, she is putty in his hands. To her he seems to be the most brilliant and charming being on earth. Whatever he suggests, Eve will be eager to try in order to maintain this newfound appreciation with which the serpent has provided her. Eve’s choice is clear: she can either refuse the forbidden fruit and return to her cloistered and unappreciated existence in Eden, or risk her life and quench her appetite for recognition. Naturally, “she plucked, she ate” (IX. 781).

Unlike Eve, Adam is content in Eden. He has no desire to step out of the comforts of the garden and risk losing his protected existence. Why should he want to? Since Adam is already seen as the superior being in Eden, there is not much reason for him to desire recognition. But Adam is forced to step out of his cloistered, animal-like existence when Eve eats from the tree. He is forced to become a man. Again, Hegel’s theory of recognition is helpful in understanding how Adam asserts himself in Book IX as a man. Besides his desire for recognition, Hegel’s “first man” differs from the animals in a second and much more fundamental way. This man wants not only to be recognized by other men, but also to be recognized as a man. And what constitutes man’s identity as a man, the most fundamental and uniquely human characteristic, is his ability to risk his own life. For by risking his life, man proves that he can act contrary to his most powerful and basic instinct, the instinct for self-preservation. He is demonstrably capable of acting in ways that totally contravene his natural instincts and contravene them not for the sake of satisfying a higher or more powerful instinct, but in a way, purely for the sake of contravention. This is one reason why Achilles is willing to risk his life in battle and also why Adam sacrifices eternal life in paradise to be with Eve. For Homer and for Milton, the desire for recognition is a driving force in human history. The Fall is the first step pushing human history onward. Eve’s desire for recognition and Adam’s willingness to actively risk his life make them fully human for the first time—these impulses separate them, just as in Genesis, from the rest of the animal kingdom. But the question remains—what kind of human being does Milton want his heroes to be? And why should his answer necessarily be in defiance of God’s command?

In a letter to Master Samuel Hartlib regarding the education system in England, Milton wrote that a good teacher should inspire his students with “the study of learning and the admiration of virtue, stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages.” With this kind of teaching, the students “may despise and scorn their childish and ill-taught qualities, to delight in manly and liberal exercises,” with the result that the teacher infuses “into their young breasts such an ingenuous and noble ardour as would not fail to make many of

them renowned and matchless men” (*Of Education*, 230–231). In choosing to be an epic poet, Milton is acting as this kind of educator for an entire civilization. The traditional epic set the standard for a society to live by—it is the epic poet’s responsibility to educate his fellow citizens on how to be virtuous in their socio-political and religious world. The objective of Milton’s epic is to engage Christian readers and help them to be better Christians. When Milton describes an educator as one who should inspire students to be “manly” and “renowned and matchless men,” he is not suggesting that the teacher instruct students to “turn the other cheek,” but rather is referring to the classical model of virtue and manliness. People should be willing to go to battle and risk their lives for what they believe in. It seems to be this kind of person whom Milton most admires and whom he attempts to make the model for his readers to emulate.

In the closing books of *Paradise Lost*, the angel Michael shows Adam a vision of the future. Michael relates to Adam the story of biblical heroes who remain true to their personal religious convictions even in the face of widespread condemnation. These heroes are willing to risk their lives to stand up for God and their belief in a truth that goes against social norms. Michael emphasizes the actions of Noah and Enoch, who both risk death in their obedience to God. When Milton wrote a tragic drama he chose the Biblical hero Samson, a man dedicated to God and willing to die in order to begin the delivery of Israel from the Philistines. There is no doubt that Milton was fully invested in characters who stand up for their convictions. In *Areopagitica*, Milton writes,

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. (*Areopagitica*, 247–248)

Milton clearly favors the person who is not afraid to take risks and enter unfamiliar territory. On the other hand, Milton seems to despise weak people who are so afraid of failure that they cloister themselves away so that they never have to face an adverse situation. In other words, Milton praises individuals who revolt against the community to promote their own personal convictions, and he looks down upon people who fear leaving the comfort of following prescribed laws and traditions.

We have been examining Adam’s epic choice and questioning why he turns his back on God if Milton is trying to instruct readers on how to be better Christians. The answer to this question is that by rejecting the orthodox path—following God’s commandment—and, instead, risking his life to be with the woman he loves, Adam does, in fact, become a better person in Christian terms as Milton understood them. Adam’s decision to leave the cloistered and childlike world of Paradise in favor of a new existence full of strife can be seen as a step away from an older Catholic conception of virtue that Milton rejected and toward his Protestant ideal. Milton portrays Adam’s choice to fall in the noblest possible terms by aligning his decision with the

classical epic tradition. He does this to show that Protestant virtue—striving for personal improvement—is more impressive than the cloistered virtue of Catholicism. In other words, a Protestant who is virtuous while living a full and complete life—including getting married and having sex—is more impressive than a Catholic monk who maintains his virtue by hiding from the world and sexual experience. This is a crucial point in understanding Milton’s epic as well as seeing how Adam’s choice, in fact, makes him better spiritually, a more complete human being. In Milton’s scheme, Adam and Eve both reach a higher level of spirituality once they have fallen because it is only after the Fall that they realize their individual virtues and then use them to complement one another and strive for a higher synthesis.

The concept that the love and sex of a husband and wife result in spiritual and religious experience is a distinctly Protestant idea in Milton’s view. It is only after the Fall that Adam and Eve’s relationship is elevated to the level of a spiritual experience. It is true that before the Fall they say that they love one another and do have sex, but this prelapsarian love seems more like love out of necessity, rather than love because of a higher or more spiritual completion. The prelapsarian love is comparable to love in an arranged marriage—they must love and have sex with each other because they have been placed together by someone else. Indeed, in Eve’s account of her first meeting with Adam, she emphasizes how God had to lead her to her mate, against her will:

but follow me,
 And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
 Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, he
 Whose image thou art, him thou shall enjoy
 Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear
 Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called
 Mother of human race: what could I do,
 But follow straight, invisibly thus led? (IV. 469 – 476)

By contrast, the fallen love Adam and Eve share is more like the love between a couple who are brought together in completion through marriage. In particular, Adam’s decision to join Eve in the Fall means that he consciously chooses her as his mate, rather than having her just handed to him by God as a companion.

After all the quarrels Adam and Eve undergo subsequent to their fall, and all the mutual recriminations, one might think that their love had been weakened, but Milton shows them having found a new bond and a new sense of purpose. Eve claims that what they have gone through, and their common enemy, should bring them closer together:

While yet we live, scarce one short hour perhaps,
 Between us two let there be peace, both joining,
 As joined in injuries, one enmity
 Against a Foe by doom express assigned us. (X. 923 – 926)

Adam eloquently accepts Eve's plea for reconciliation, and thinks ahead to their future together as allies:

But rise, let us no more contend, nor blame
 Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive
 In offices of Love, how we may lighten
 Each other's burden in our share of woe. (X. 958 – 961)

Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve after the Fall is a vivid example of his belief that a man and a woman can complement each other, smoothing out one another's faults and enhancing each other's strengths. The Adam and Eve who emerge out of the Fall are the ideal couple that Milton advocates in his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. They share a new love that is more true and spiritual—a love that is like that of Spenser's couple in his *Amoretti*—the meshing and unification of the erotic and the spiritual.

Before the Fall, Adam turned to the angel Raphael for advice about his sexual appetite and his immense attraction to Eve, thus relying on an authority figure to guide his personal, religious, and erotic life. In Book VIII when Adam asks the angel about his desires, Raphael recommends that he refrain from carnal passions and search for a pure love that rejuvenates and expands his mind as much as his body. He goes on to say that, while Eve is very beautiful on the outside, she is less worthy than Adam on the inside. He continues to suggest that Adam rise above his carnal passions. Just as Raphael links Adam's powerful physical attraction to Eve with the need to avoid Satan's temptation, the Catholic Church links sexual appetite with temptation and sin. Milton rejects this religious doctrine in *Paradise Lost* by having Adam reject the advice of Raphael and God in order to be with Eve. The result is that Adam and Eve attain a higher level of spirituality together. This is the spiritualized paradise that Michael ultimately promises them:

then wilt thou not be loath
 To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
 A paradise within thee, happier far. (XII. 585 – 587)

Here paradise ceases to be a literal place on a map, and becomes very much in Protestant terms a mental state, something spiritual rather than material.¹⁵ Adam and Eve's love for one another increases just as their desire to become more truly religious in Protestant terms increases. Adam and Eve find a new paradise in their love and devotion to one another, turning away from Eden's cloistered walls hand in hand to set out on a new Protestant adventure—seeking spiritual fulfillment together as a human couple. In Milton's Christian poem, the epic decision humanizes the protagonists, in sharp contrast to what happens in Homer's *Iliad*, where in pagan terms Achilles' choice takes him to the level of the gods. Milton reshapes the classical epic, which had celebrated demigods raised above the ordinary level of human beings, so that his poem now offers an Everyman and an Everywoman in the most basic activity of mar-

riage as the pinnacle of virtue.

Milton intended *Paradise Lost* to be an epic that sets the standard for Christians to live by. Like Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's epic is meant to be a "cultural producer"—a beacon for Christians to follow in their own lives. As we have seen, Milton carefully planned the central epic decision of his poem to be one in which the hero must choose between God and Eve. At first it seems that Adam has chosen the path that leads him away from spiritual fulfillment and away from the divine, but this turns out not to be the case. Kant offers a similar interpretation of the story in *Genesis*:

Morally, the first step from this latter state [of ignorance and innocence] was therefore a fall; physically, it was a punishment, for a whole host of formerly unknown ills were a consequence of this fall. The history of nature therefore begins with good, for it is the work of God, while the history of freedom begins with wickedness, for it is the work of man. Hence the individual must consider as his own fault, not only every act of wickedness which he commits, but also all the evils which he suffers; and yet at the same time, insofar as he is a member of a whole (a species), he must admire and praise the wisdom and purposiveness of the whole arrangement.¹⁶

Like Milton seeking to "justify the ways of God to men" (I. 26), Kant interprets the Fall as a story of the growth of human freedom. In Kant as well as in Milton, while Adam's choice is not the orthodox one, it is ultimately revealed to be the best path to a higher level of spirituality. The epic decision turns out to be not one that rejects God, but one that shows a new, Protestant way of becoming closer to God.

[Notes]

1. Lewis White Beck, ed., *Immanuel Kant: On History*, trans. Emil L. Fackenheim (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963)59.
2. Hegel's theory of tragedy is that the hero is forced to make a decision between two goods—either decision will result in negative consequences. For Hegel's theory of tragedy, see Anne and Henry Paolucci, eds., *Hegel: On Tragedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). This volume includes A. C. Bradley's helpful essay "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy" (367–388).
3. I quote the *Iliad* from *Homer: The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), with book and line numbers cited in the body of the essay.
4. James Nohrnberg, "The *Iliad*," in *Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, eds. Michael Seidel and Edward Mendelson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977)4.
4. The ideas of this paper grow out of a course I took with Professor Nohrnberg in 2005; I also wish to acknowledge his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.
5. *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1961), Book 4, ll. 540–545.
6. I quote *Paradise Lost* from *John Milton: The Major Works*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), with book and line numbers cited in the body of the essay. All quotations from Milton are taken from this edition, with work and page numbers cited in the body of the essay.

7. For Milton's relation to the Biblical story, see J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1968).
8. For a thoughtful discussion of Book IX of *Paradise Lost* in relation to the classical epic tradition, see C. M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton* (London: Macmillan, 1963) 199 – 210.
9. Nohrnberg, *The Iliad*, 9.
10. I quote the Bible from *Genesis*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), with chapter and verse numbers cited in the body of the essay.
11. Alter, *Genesis*, 13 (Alter's note to this passage).
12. My understanding of Hegel is largely based on the account of his philosophy given in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) 143 – 61. Fukuyama's account is in turn largely based on Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969). The account of the "genesis of man" in Hegel's *Phenomenology* actually grows out of a tradition in German idealism of developing its view of human origins in terms of commentary on Genesis. As my epigraph indicates, this tradition begins with Kant's essay "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." For an account of the role of Genesis in German idealism, see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 204 – 206 for Kant, 225 – 237 for Hegel; the fact that Abrams refers to Kant's work as "secular theodicy" (206) suggests the connection of German idealism to Milton's project in *Paradise Lost*.
13. This point was made by James Nohrnberg in a course lecture, April, 19, 2005.
14. James Nohrnberg, course lecture notes, April 19, 2005.
15. On this point, see Northrop Frye, *The Return from Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 54, 110.
16. Kant, "Conjectural Beginning" 60.

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