

Marriage as Heroic Struggle in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Anneliese Kvamme

Western New Mexico University

“Sing, Heav'nly Muse...I thence, / Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song...while it pursues / Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.”¹ Thus does Milton, at the start of his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, make the claim to reach beyond the efforts of other poets or writers in the English language. Certainly, creating a Biblical epic, drawing on the inspiration of the great epic writers of antiquity, as well as the key text of the Hebrews and Christians, would be a grand enough effort to warrant a plea to a muse, particularly with the limited information provided in Genesis on the story of Adam and Eve. But more than this, Milton would require the assistance of a heavenly muse to reinterpret the events of the original Hebraic tale, making it more Christian and embedding his decided opinions on the purpose of marriage and the appropriate interaction of husband and wife.

In this process, Milton uncovers what I will call the “heroic nature” of the first married couple in tradition, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as they experience struggle between themselves and with outside forces. Through this heroic struggle, the couple increases their virtue through trials, errors, repentance, and the development of unity in their marriage. With this couple as the prime example, Milton uses his reinterpreted epic to teach his audience what he believes are the principles of a fit marriage in a godly relationship.

John Milton's Beliefs on Marriage

John Milton ended his bachelor years in 1642, at age 34, by marrying Mary Powell, a woman 16 years his junior.² By the time he married, Milton had studied scriptures, scriptural writings, and

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 1.6–16. References are to book and line.

² Barbara Keifer Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 156.

classical writings and had thereby formed an expectation of the correct relationship and state of marriage. Haller notes that Milton believed he had read all the best literature on the subject and expected “to enter into a very special kind of intimacy with the woman he had chosen.”³ An examination of Milton’s own writings, contrasted with the general ideas of the time, indicate something of these expectations.

During the seventeenth century, Puritan attitudes about marriage contrasted sharply with that of the Church of England. In *English Domestic Relations 1487–1653*, Chilton Powell notes that the Church of England professed that marriage was for three causes: first, to beget children; second, to avoid carnal sin; and third, to provide mutual help and comfort.⁴ This prioritization seems an outgrowth of the catalyst that led to the origin of the independent church, established by King Henry VIII after several fruitless attempts to appeal to the Catholic Pope for an annulment to his marriage, which had not produced a male heir.⁵ Thus, in the tenets of the Church of England, marriage was considered primarily a necessary evil for the propagation of the race. By contrast, the Puritans considered marriage “an honorable and natural society of man and woman, of which children were the proper result but not the prime cause.”⁶ Thomas Becon, an English Protestant reformer, writes in his *Booke of Matrimony*, published in 1560, that marriage is

an hie, holye and blessed order of life,
ordayned...of God, ...wherein one man and one
woman are ... knit together in one fleshe and
body in the feare and loue of God, ... that they
two may dwel together, as one fleshe and body of
one wyl and mynd in all honesty, virtue and
godliness.⁷

³ Ibid, 81.

⁴ Chilton Lathan Powell, *English Domestic Relations 1487–1653: A Study of Matrimony and Family Life in Theory and Practice as Revealed by the Literature, Law, and History of the Period*. (Union: Lawbook Exchange, 2001), 122.

⁵ “Church of England.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified February 28, 2020, www.britannica.com/topic/Church-of-England.

⁶ Powell, *Domestic Relations*, 121.

⁷ Ibid, 126–127.

Thus, the primary purpose of marriage was not procreation but rather the unification of a man and woman in the love of God, to live together and support each other. Implicit in this is the requirement that each spouse must believe in God, else how could they be unified in the love of God? Becon continues by outlining the spousal duties. The husband is to be a guide, philosopher, and friend to the wife; to provide for her; and to defend and help her. The wife is to serve the husband in subjection, to be modest in her speech and dress, and to manage the household. Both spouses are to love each other and beget children.⁸

In many ways, Milton's ideas of marriage in his writings were similar to those defined by Becon. For instance, in his *Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce*, Milton points out the divine origin of marriage,⁹ and he notes in *Tetrachordon: Genesis Places* that "Piety and Religion is the main tye of Christian Matrimony."¹⁰ Milton also sees a distinction between the leadership status of the spouses, noting in his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* that there is a "reservation of superior rights to the husband."¹¹ He may have understood this distinction not only from his Biblical readings but also from his classical readings, particularly in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle notes that the friendship of a husband and wife "involves an inequality between the parties,"¹² because there is an inherent difference in the functions of the spouses, who "help each other by throwing their *peculiar* gifts into the common stock."¹³ Milton, like Becon, also points out that within a marriage, the husband and wife must become one in likeness, fitness of mind, and disposition; else, they cannot be one

⁸ Ibid, 128.

⁹ John Milton, "The Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce." *The John Milton Reading Room*, accessed February 22, 2021. https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/ddd/book_1/text.shtml. Preface.

¹⁰ John Milton, "Tetrachordon: Genesis Places." *The John Milton Reading Room*, accessed February 22, 2021. https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/tetrachordon/genesis/text.shtml. Verse 27.

¹¹ John Milton, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine, Compiled From the Holy Scriptures Alone*, trans. Charles R Sumner. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1825), 230.

¹² Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross. (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 134.

¹³ Ibid, 142, italics added.

flesh,¹⁴ in accordance with God's declaration in Genesis. Finally, Milton also specifies the necessity for each spouse to support the other, stating that "the prime end and form of marriage...is conjugal love, and mutual assistance."¹⁵

However, Milton takes his definition of marriage and its purposes a step farther in insisting that the primary purpose of marriage is not only so that man have help in earthly efforts, but that man have a fit companion and conversation. In his *Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce*, stating that marriage was instituted for "the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life,"¹⁶ Milton makes the case that marriage implies not only a worldly partnership but something more—a companionate relationship. According to Milton, "in God's intention a meet and happy *conversation* is the chiefest and noblest end of marriage."¹⁷ By this, Milton means more than simple verbal exchanges. According to David Randall, by the late seventeenth century the concept of conversation also encompassed sociability, particularly familiar and virtuous interactions.¹⁸ Thus, the primary end of marriage in Milton's view is focused on the mind and spirit of the man rather than on his carnal wants or needs.

The reader might be left with the impression that these marital benefits are intended only for the man. Interestingly enough, although Milton focuses primarily on the man in his discussion, he ultimately clarifies in his *Treatise* that this should be a mutual condition. Here, he specifies that "the form of marriage consists in the *mutual* exercise of benevolence, love, help, and solace between the espoused parties."¹⁹ Again, Aristotle's *Ethics* may have influenced Milton, for Aristotle notes that friendship between spouses, although based on their usefulness to each other and the pleasure they may take in each other's company, "may be based also on virtue, if the parties are good; for each has its own virtue and they will delight in the fact."²⁰ Thus, by the time Milton

¹⁴ Milton, "Tetrachordon," 24.

¹⁵ Milton, *Treatise*, 258.

¹⁶ Milton, "Doctrine & Discipline," Preface.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, italics added.

¹⁸ David Randall, *The Conversational Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 6–7.

¹⁹ Milton, *Treatise*, 245, italics added.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 142.

sought marriage himself, he may have expected to have a relationship with his wife in which he could associate freely, with a mutual exchange of respectful ideas and social intercourse. Certainly, in his later treatises on divorce, Milton gave the impression to one respondent that he would “count no woman to due conversation accessible...except she can speak Hebrew, Greek, Latine, & French, and dispute against the Canon law as well as [him], or at least be able to hold discourse with [him],”²¹ indicating, perhaps, the level of intelligence, refinement, virtue, and interaction Milton seemed to expect.

Although that description was likely an exaggeration, Milton’s expectations for a wife were apparently not shared by Mary. About a month after their nuptials, Mary returned to her parents. Edward Phillips, Milton’s nephew, later suggested that Mary may have been disappointed to find that Milton lived a reserved life.²² Also, Mary may not have been pleased at an expectation that she would join Milton in his studies,²³ an indication that the anonymous writer responding to Milton’s divorce treatise may have understood Milton more than Milton would have liked. Certainly, Milton did not find in his young wife the companion he had expected, one who would share his interests and his hours in conversation. While Milton unsuccessfully sent for Mary to return several times, no early biographer notes that Milton had any criticism of his “wife’s character or fitness of disposition.”²⁴ This seems to indicate that Milton, while suffering the disgrace of a deserted husband, was still dedicated to developing a companionate relationship with his wife rather than being a tyrant. Without the unity of mutual benevolence, love, help, and solace between spouses, Milton believed the marriage itself would be virtually dissolved.²⁵

This struggle within his own marriage may have provoked much thought, research, and personal insight on the topic. Whether driven by his own experiences or merely coincidental in timing, through a series of treatises on divorce, Milton refined his

²¹ Lara Dodds, “‘To Due Conversation Accessible’: Or, The Problem of Courtship in Milton’s Divorce Tracts and ‘Paradise Lost’.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56, no. 1 (2014): 42.

²² Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 157.

²³ Gordon Campbell, and Thomas N. Corns. *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought*. (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), 152.

²⁴ Powell, *English Domestic Relations*, 227.

²⁵ Milton, *Treatise*, 245–246.

ideas on marriage, using Biblical references, classical concepts, and his own powerful reasoning capability. These refined ideas would emerge in his depiction of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

Major Literary Influences

Although it is widely accepted that *Paradise Lost* is an epic inspired by the epics of classical Greece and Rome, the epic itself had evolved at the time of the Renaissance. According to Barbara Lewalski, Renaissance epics were a mixture of subjects, forms, and styles.²⁶ John Shawcross, who also sees a variety of styles used by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, asserts that “the more heroic argument...requires the full gamut of styles.”²⁷ Thus, in his endeavor to write “Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,”²⁸ Milton draws upon heroic, comic, and pastoral traditions, among others, adding these to the classic epic tradition in his creation. In the process, Milton works to “redefine classical heroism in Christian terms.”²⁹

At this time, other poets had been redefining the heroic mode, primarily imitating five-act tragedies. They addressed subjects dealing with royalist politics or the conflict of love and honor, avoiding any representation of the supernatural.³⁰ One example of these is John Dryden, who produced a series of heroic poems focused on subjects from Cromwell to Charles II to London, celebrating martial virtues.³¹ Another was Abraham Cowley, who attempted to write a modern Biblical epic after the pattern of Virgil, emphasizing martial topics, but who did not complete it, noting that even a very good poet may have difficulty writing on such exalted topics.³²

Edmund Spenser differed from others of the time in that his *The Faerie Queene*, while focusing on stories of heroic knights,

²⁶ Barbara Keifer Lewalski, “The Genres of *Paradise Lost*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 81.

²⁷ John T. Shawcross, “The Style and Genre of *Paradise Lost*,” in *New Essays on *Paradise Lost**, ed. Thomas Kranidas (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 32.

²⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.16.

²⁹ Lewalski, “Genres,” 79.

³⁰ Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 445.

³¹ Thomas Luxon, “Heroic Restorations: Dryden and Milton.” *Dartmouth Scholarship* (2017): 7–8.

³² Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 447.

featured characters representing Christian values. Redcrosse, for instance, is like a “true warfaring Christian” of whom Milton wrote, illustrating virtue as “the control of all powers, mental desires as well as physical desires, by the rational element in the soul.”³³ Milton was impressed by Spenser’s work, telling John Dryden that Spenser was his original, likely in the inspirational sense.³⁴ Edwin Greenlaw asserts that “In Spenser Milton found an exposition of idealism in a form that...made a deeper impression on him than any other single element in his experience,”³⁵ moving Milton to incorporate this idealism in his *Paradise Lost*.

In Milton’s epic, heroism takes on a decidedly Christian aspect. What identifies a person as heroic is not his military prowess but rather his efforts in “striving valiantly for good against opposing forces.”³⁶ Although Milton’s epic includes the account of heavenly battles with military valor, the angels, both as warriors and as guards around the Garden, are not especially effective, because they can neither defeat the hordes of hell nor keep Satan out of Eden. In the tale of Adam and Eve, Milton incorporates elements of Christian tragedy, wherein the individual suffers trials that he must endure in patience through grace,³⁷ into his depiction of heroism. Milton, himself, informs his audience that his depiction of the fall will be related in this manner, saying, “I now must change / Those notes to tragic.”³⁸ However, even while he relates tragedy, he claims that these events are “Not less but more heroic”³⁹ than the martial feats of Achilles. In claiming that his tale is one of heroism, Milton claims that the process by which Christians prove their worthiness to God deserves this name.

In relating Christian principles through his epic, Milton does not intend to merely entertain. Like Spenser and other Renaissance poets, Milton believed the poet should be a teacher.⁴⁰ He speaks of this in *Areopagitica*, stating that Spenser is a better teacher than the medieval theologians John Duns Scotus or

³³ Edwin Greenlaw, “A Better Teacher than Aquinas,” *Studies in Philology* 14, no. 2 (1917): 211.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁶ Shawcross, “The Style,” 20.

³⁷ Lewalski, “Genres,” 87.

³⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.5–6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.14.

⁴⁰ Lewalski, “Genres,” 82; Greenlaw, “A Better Teacher,” 198.

Thomas Aquinas.⁴¹ By illustrating the struggle of his character Guion against the powers of evil, Spenser is a more effective teacher through his poetry than the theologians are by their reasoning, according to Milton. In addition, in his epic's invocation, Milton calls upon the same Heavenly Muse who "didst inspire / That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed."⁴² Here, Milton makes a direct connection between his function and that of Moses, the original teacher of the material Milton is about to relate. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Milton, in his portrayal of the first marriage in *Paradise Lost*, intends not only to retell a Biblical story but also to teach and guide the reader to a more perfect understanding of the implications of this tale, reinterpreted through Milton's lens.

Heroic Marriage in *Paradise Lost*

Milton's depiction of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden illustrates his concept of marriage and the struggle faced by a married couple. Although the couple is joined by God, the expectation that husband and wife will be "one flesh, one heart, one soul"⁴³ is one which will require effort to nurture. This is intended to be a harmonious relationship that is "mutual, in proportion due / Giv'n and received...fit to participate / All rational delight,"⁴⁴ a union intended to be companionable and helpful to both parties. However, the ultimate goal must be achieved through their combined labor. Much as the work in the garden "increases daily in complexity and challenge,"⁴⁵ so the complexity of the struggle in the relationship between Adam and Eve increases as they move along the path of progression until they are "by degrees of merit raised"⁴⁶ to dwell in the presence of God.

Their first challenge arises when their mutual adversary, Satan, sends to Eve's mind a dream of disobedience, the relation of which

⁴¹ John Milton, "Areopagitica; A Speech of Mr. John Milton." *The John Milton Reading Room*, accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica/text.html.

⁴² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.7–8.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 8.499.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 8.385–391.

⁴⁵ Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, "Innocence and Experience in Milton's Eden," in *New Essays on Paradise Lost*, ed. Thomas Kranidas (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 93.

⁴⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 7.157.

disturbs Adam. While Adam consoles himself that Eve would not really disobey the commandment of God, an unspoken disharmony creeps between them. Eve, while appearing to be cheered, “silently a gentle tear let[s] fall / From either eye,”⁴⁷ perhaps in the bittersweet memory of the pleasant visions she had seen. Thus, the first indication of disunity appears between the couple in the form of a secret.

The unity in the marriage is further disrupted after Eve proposes the practical course of “divid[ing] [their] labours”⁴⁸ to be more effective in their gardening. Adam expresses concern that Eve, alone, might fall into “danger or dishonor,”⁴⁹ victim to their common enemy who may be seeking to “disturb / Conjugal love.”⁵⁰ The suggestion that Adam doubts her commitment to him offends Eve, driving an emotional wedge between the couple. His parting words, telling her to “rely / On what [she] has of virtue,”⁵¹ do little to heal this hurt, implying that her virtue may be insufficient to withstand outside assault. Determined to prove herself, Eve departs.

These events set the stage for the most significant struggle of their marriage. After Eve is deceived by Satan and makes the choice to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Milton moves her thoughts into a direction calculated to bring not a spirit of unity but rather a spirit of competition into the marriage. As Eve marvels at her growing knowledge, she considers keeping from Adam this new wisdom, thus “keep[ing] the odds of knowledge in [her] power.”⁵² Rather than seeing herself as a partner with Adam, with her own gifts to complement his, she contemplates ruling the relationship. Unwilling, however, to face potential punishment for her transgression alone, she resolves to bring Adam the fruit, as well. Milton’s Adam, seeing no possibility of happiness without Eve, feeling “The bond of nature draw [him] to [his] own,”⁵³ chooses to eat the forbidden fruit. Rather than unifying the couple through their transgression, however, the choice leads to a fundamental crisis in their marriage.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.130–131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.214.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.267.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.262–263.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.373–374.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9.820.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.956.

As hoped by Satan, who sought not “to be [himself] less miserable...but others to make such / As [he],”⁵⁴ the couple become miserable in their guilt. The marital struggle reaches a climax when Adam, feeling the regret associated with sin, but not yet moved toward repentance and correction, with “fierce passion” and “stern regard,”⁵⁵ rejects Eve, insisting that if he had been alone, he would have “persisted happy.”⁵⁶ In his anguish, he rejects not only the divinely established marriage but also his faith in God’s wisdom in creating mankind.

However, rather than being repulsed by Adam’s rejection, Eve pleads with him: “Forsake me not thus, Adam.... Between us two let there be peace.”⁵⁷ She takes responsibility for her part in the transgression, asking that “all the sentence from [Adam’s] head removed may light / On [her].”⁵⁸ In these words, she is the first to exhibit the “patience and heroic martyrdom”⁵⁹ that Milton identifies as the “new standard of epic heroism.”⁶⁰ The love Eve bears Adam leads her to make the first move in Christian repentance, expressing not only sorrow for her offenses toward Adam but also a desire to make restitution. Her righteous desire for peace in the marriage sets the example for Adam, moving him to lose his anger and “with peaceful words [upraise] her soon.”⁶¹ Milton illustrates through this the way in which a Christian couple can not only overcome disagreements but also support each other in their pursuit of righteousness through example.

By the end, Adam and Eve have become unquestionably united. They have encountered temptation and fallen; they have fought against their own natures and each other and come out victorious, with their marriage and personal virtue more firm. Adam affirms the new idea of Christian heroism: his responsibility to obey and depend on God, to overcome evil by good, and to rejoice in suffering for truth’s sake,⁶² while Eve embraces her role

⁵⁴ Ibid, 9.126–128.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 10.865–866.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 10.874.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 10.914–924.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 10.934–935.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 9.32.

⁶⁰ Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 486.

⁶¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10.946.

⁶² Ibid, 12.561–573.

as the first of women, through whom the Savior will come.⁶³ Now, with the understanding that by expanding their virtues through trials, they will have “A paradise within [them],”⁶⁴ they face their future in the world outside the garden. If they, as a couple, had not gone through their struggle, thereby learning to repent, to forgive, to reconcile, and to pull together in faith, “with good / Still overcoming evil,”⁶⁵ they would not have emerged prepared to face future trials together.

Conclusion

Milton demonstrates through his depiction of the relationship between Adam and Eve that the nature of marriage as a field for heroic struggle means that, although sometimes the struggle may be individual, the triumph is collective. In working to maintain their marriage, Adam and Eve each come to know their own and the other’s worth and importance, as well as the principles required for their personal and collective growth. Thus, Milton sets forth his foundational belief that marriage, particularly companionate marriage, should prove a vehicle for men and women to follow the Christian process of further developing themselves and overcoming their weaknesses through repentance, patience, and faith.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 12.621–623.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 12.587.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 12.565–566.