

In Her Shape How Lovely: The Habit of Virtue in *Paradise Lost*

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Just as the *Iliad* is preoccupied with rage and the *Aeneid* concerned with piety, *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem built around a single subject. What that subject is has been the topic of many scholarly debates, to the point where some have claimed that the search is flawed from the beginning, that Milton never chose an epic subject, and that we are merely wasting our time in looking for one. But Milton was, if nothing else, a man with ambition. In the words of Sharon Achinstein, he “was surprisingly committed to a single goal, that of making his audience fit to achieve self-governance through training in virtue” (8). It was not enough for Milton to treat an epic subject. He had to do it in such a way that his epic subject roused his readers to action. Following in the footsteps of Edmund Spenser, whom he regarded as “a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas” (Patrides 213), Milton decided that the best way to train his readers in their pursuit of virtue was through poetry. By representing what is true, good, and beautiful as accurately as possible, and showing what is false, evil, and ugly with the same exhaustive attention to detail, Milton’s epic shows its readers how to live truly virtuous lives, focusing on the praise of God rather than the praise of men.

Borrowing from St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas called virtue a “habitus operativus bonus,” a habit of doing good (Summa II.1.55). For many philosophers, going back as far as Aristotle, virtue was a lifelong pursuit, not something attained or possessed, but something cultivated and exercised. Virtue was, in many ways, the ultimate goal of education, the wisdom to always choose a middle path instead of throwing oneself at an extreme (Walker 108). As the Catholic Encyclopedia puts it:

Virtue is the perfection of a thing... In its strictest meaning, however, as used by moral philosophers and theologians, it signifies a habit superadded to a faculty of the soul, disposing it to elicit with readiness acts conformable to our rational nature.

(newadvent.org/cathen)

The connection between virtue and rationality is well established in *Paradise Lost* – the archangel Michael says explicitly that virtue is reason in XII.98. When reason and right action are divorced from one another, the results are at best ugly (see PL III.103-111), and at worst catastrophic. The entire story of the Fall hinges on a lapse in virtue, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God even when they knew, rationally, that what they were doing could lead to no good. Milton would agree that virtue involves “acts conformable to our rational nature.” But from where would he say that the readiness arises?

Some scholars, such as Stephen Fallon, have argued that, even though Milton’s prose explicitly states that we acquire virtue over time, his poetry undermines this position by emphasizing how its characters react in single, isolated moments. This is true as far as it goes – Milton loved a dramatic standoff – but we should note that those isolated moments don’t appear out of nowhere. Whether Adam and Eve stand or fall is as much due to their changing view of virtue as it is to their decisions in the moment of temptation. This is even more true of Jesus in *Paradise Regained*, as Bryan Adams Hampton has argued (167-226). But whether Adam and Eve display their virtue in a moment or over time is less important to Milton’s project than the habits of his readers. When it comes to his audience, Milton rests everything on the cultivation of virtue through habit. It is the lifeblood of all his major poetry.

Milton thought of poetry in more pragmatic terms than we might be used to, as he relates in a famous passage in *Areopagitica* on “the benefits which may be had of books promiscuously read.”

As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. (Patrides 213)

Even unfallen angels have trouble recognizing evil when it hides (PL III.682-685), and for humankind since the Fall, the task of discerning what's good and what's bad is all but impossible. Life throws curveballs at us, and it's not always immediately apparent how we ought to react. In his treatise *Of Education*, Milton explicitly connects this quality of the fallen world with its repair through education.

The end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. (Patrides 182)

The purpose of education, then, is to fix the effects of the Fall by teaching people to know God and love him. That's how the "true wayfaring Christian" gains the ability to choose what's good and reject what's evil. Of course, education by itself isn't enough. Souls that would possess true virtue must be united to "the heavenly grace of faith." Education is the process of learning, by grace, to love what's good and despise what's evil, thereby being united to God.

This sheds light on Milton's reasons for writing *Paradise Lost*. Combined with *Paradise Regained*, it is a poem designed to train its readers in virtue by teaching them *how* to read, through an

accurate display of both good and evil – the best of the best and the worst of the worst. In other words, virtue is central to his project, both in the story that he’s telling and in the effect he wanted to have on his readers.

For Milton it appears that proper reading is closely associated with the fruits of divine virtue, carefully tended and maintained through the daily exercises of contemplation and practical obedience... (Hampton 157)

Adam and Eve cannot be perfect models of virtue since they did not stand up to temptation. In fact, they fell through the very process of growing in knowledge. As Basil Willey puts it, “Genesis, to which Milton must needs adhere, represented the Fall as due to, or consisting of, the acquisition by Man of that very knowledge, the Knowledge of good and evil, by the possession of which alone Milton the humanist believed man could be truly virtuous” (qtd. in Blackburn 121). If Man fell through knowledge, or in spite of knowledge, then knowledge alone is clearly not the solution to the Fall. One can learn from the fate of Adam and Eve, in the same way that one can learn from a fable, but they give the reader no hint of how to overcome temptation. Training in virtue requires something more.

Fortunately, there is one character whose acquired virtue provides an example for Milton’s readers to follow: Jesus in *Paradise Regained*, “whose extraordinary participation in the Divine Text anchors him through the storm of Satan’s temptations” (Hampton 157). Christ’s successful resistance to Satan’s temptation is the key to Milton’s entire project, since it is, first and foremost, a display of virtue habituated over time through constant rumination on the word of God – the same thing he wanted for the readers of his poem.

As he makes clear in his theological treatise (*De Doctrina Christiana*) and through references to “our first parents” in *Of Education* (Patrides 182) and Adam’s fall in *Areopagitica* (213), Milton believed that the basic facts of his story were true. The Fall was not an abstract concept for him. He truly believed he was living in a world shaped by that first disobedience and that he had an obligation to address it to the best of his ability. If, as I believe, Milton saw virtue as a habit, acquired over time through meditation on the word of God, the effect of his poetry was as important to him as the words themselves. Milton himself muddies the distinction between poetry and poet in *An Apology for Smectymnuus* when he says,

...he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought him selfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men, or famous Cities, unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that is praise-worthy.
(Patrides 62)

With this statement, Milton connects writing well and living well, a relationship of mind and practice that he extends to his readers.

Jonathan Scott has shown how Milton saw the habit of virtue as a means to redeem the republican government of England. While this is true, and an important goal for Milton, Milton wasn’t only interested in the worldly, temporal effects of education. He was also mindful of education’s spiritual, heavenly ramifications. Near the end of *Areopagitica*, he describes the person who seeks truth as Iris searching for the parts of Osiris’s body.

From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangl'd body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second coming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortall feature of lovelines and perfection. (Patrides 235)

If virtue and the search for truth are connected, true virtue cannot be fully attained in this life. The search will never end until Christ returns in the final moments of history.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton commonly uses the word “virtue” as a generic term for angelic beings, possibly following the celestial hierarchy laid out by the fifth-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, which Aquinas outlines in the *Summa* (I.108). Even this apparently humdrum usage reveals a subtle consistency in the poem. In Book II, both Satan and Beelzebub refer to the other fallen angels as “virtues” (PL II.15, II.311) in an attempt to preserve the dignity of their recently routed army. Lest we think they’re just fooling themselves, the narrator adds, “for neither do the Spirits damn’d / loose all thir vertue” (II.482-83). This passage is interesting for two reasons. First, the poet highlights the fact that the loss of virtue (a certain kind of virtue, at least) is not an automatic process, like flipping a switch, but a gradual one, like a plant dying for want of light. Recently cast into hell, Satan still possesses impressive qualities. By the end of the poem, he is dark and unremarkable. The second interesting thing here is what the narrator calls “virtue.” The fallen angels praise Satan for his willingness to risk offending God by traveling to Earth, “that for the general safety he despis’d / His own” (II.481-82). Even fallen angels are awed by self-sacrifice (no matter that Satan is doing it for selfish reasons). The ability to recognize a good thing (self-sacrifice, in this instance) when they see it is, to the poet, “virtue.”

Raphael is called an “Angelic Vertue” in Book V, and during his tale of Satan’s rebellion and the ensuing war in Heaven, angels are once again called virtues, first by God the Father (PL V.601), then by Satan (V.722), and then by Abdiel (V.840). Abdiel uses the term one other time when he bemoans that Satan’s strength should continue even though his virtue is lost.

O Heav’n! that such resemblance of the Highest
Should yet remain, where faith and realtie
Remain not; wherfore should not strength and might
There fail where Vertue fails, or weakest prove
Where boldest; though to sight unconquerable? (PL VI.114-18)

It doesn’t sit well with Abdiel that Satan still looks like an unfallen angel when his “Vertue” has failed. Like many other characters in the poem, Abdiel struggles whenever appearance doesn’t match reality.

We see virtue used as a term of address in two other places. When the Father commissions the Son to create the world, the angels are described as virtues (PL VII.199), and then finally Satan, newly returned to Hell, addresses his minions as virtues just before they’re all turned into snakes (X.460). A name that once described them accurately (when used by the Father in V.601) now rings as false as Satan’s boasts. The contrast here underscores how difficult it can be for the characters (notably Adam and Eve) to discern true virtue from evil in disguise. It’s almost as if only true virtue can recognize virtue, though that’s not quite right. False virtue can also recognize true virtue, since it can’t help but be stupefied in its presence. In Book IV, Satan is surprised by two angels as he crouches next to the sleeping Eve, filling her ear with dark thoughts. The angels bring him to a cherub named Zephon, who reminds Satan that the devil has lost his sheen.

So spake the Cherube, and his grave rebuke
Severe in youthful beautie, added grace
Invincible: abasht the Devil stood,
And felt how awful goodness is, and saw
Vertue in her shape how lovly, saw, and pin'd
His loss; but chiefly to find here observd
His lustre visibly impair'd; yet seemd
Undaunted. (PL IV.844-51)

Here, virtue is personified as a female form, lovely even to Satan. But though Satan pines after goodness, grace, beauty, and virtue, lost to him, he is “abasht” in their presence, primarily because he learns that his own beauty has been diminished, the narrator tells us. The further Satan gets from the source of all virtue, the more terrible it seems to him, though no less attractive. Thus, we have the chief frustration of all the traitor angels: the one thing that could satisfy their desire (service to the most high God) has become hateful to them, in no small part because its existence destroys the illusion of their self-sufficiency.

Milton also uses the word “virtue” to describe the generative power that is the source of all life. In Book III, the narrator describes the virtue of the sun, which penetrates the Earth and warms it (III.586 and III.608), which Raphael confirms in Book VIII:

...consider first, that Great
Or Bright inferrs not Excellence: the Earth
Though, in comparison of Heav'n, so small,

Nor glistening, may of solid good contain
More plenty than the Sun that barren shines,
Whose vertue on it self works no effect,
But in the fruitful Earth... (PL VIII.90-96)

The sun may be the virtuous source of light and warmth on Earth, but it is Earth that produces life in response. Similarly, God infuses virtue in others to inspire them to various virtuous acts. In Book VI, the Father “transfuses” virtue and grace into the Son “that all may know / In Heav’n and Hell thy Power above compare” (PL VI.704-709), giving him authority to cast out Satan and his army. Later, God (Father/Son/Spirit, the distinction is unclear) creates life by infusing “vital vertue... and vital warmth / throughout the fluid Mass...” (VII.236-37) of the Earth. The acts of God are virtuous, and all virtue has its source in God, but the Father himself is not designated as such. Notably, the word “virtue” is never used in Book III, when God is introduced and when we might most expect it.

Satan plays with this relationship between virtue-giving Creator and virtue-infused Creation in Book IX, using the same scientific facts as Raphael in Book VIII, but turning the implication of them on its head. Because the Earth sits at the middle of stars and planets and is “Productive in Herb, Plant, and nobler birth / Of Creatures animate with gradual life / Of Growth, Sense, Reason, all summ’d up in Man” (PL IX.111-13), Satan reasons, the Earth is clearly the more worthy. He even compares Earth’s position as the central receptor of virtue to the position of God at the center of all things (IX.107-09). This tells us more about Satan’s state of mind than it does about the state of the Earth in the cosmos. Once we untangle the faulty logic, the implications are revealing. In terms of which direction the virtue flows, if we can put it that way, God is more similar to the sun than to the Earth. For Satan, to be the center of all means to be the receptor of all glory and virtue, not the

source. He has forgotten that every ounce of virtue he possesses is a gift from God. As Charles Williams puts it, Satan has “renounced all derivation” (35), which ultimately can only end in tragedy.

The word “virtue” or a variation of the form is used fifteen times in the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*, more than twice as much as in any of the other books. Book IX also contains at least three different perspectives on what constitutes virtue. Satan’s view of virtue has already been discussed. He says that God’s virtue is like the virtue of the sun in that it is directed outward (PL IX.110), and then wonders if the reason God didn’t repopulate Heaven with new angels when Satan fell was that the Father had run short on virtue (PL IX.145). For Satan, virtue equals power, plain and simple. It explains why he addresses his followers as virtues, and why he exhorts them to rise from the lake of fire by appealing to their virtue (PL I.320).

Adam’s view of virtue follows the correct pattern of receiving virtue from an outside source and letting it shape his desires. But is it the correct source? Earlier, in Book VIII, Adam waxes poetic on Eve in Raphael’s hearing and the angel chides him for his overzealous praise (PL VIII.561-94). Specifically, Adam says that “what [Eve] wills to do or say / Seems wisest, vertuouslest, discreetest, best” (VIII.549-50) and that “Authority and Reason on her waite” (VIII.554). Adam has located his source of virtue in something “less excellent” when he should be aiming higher.

On the other hand, receiving virtue from his relationship with Eve is not always a bad thing for Adam to do. In Book IX, when he makes his case to Eve for why they should not separate, but work together, he says

I from the influence of thy looks receive
Access in every Vertue, in thy sight
More wise, more watchful, stronger, if need were
Of outward strength; while shame, thou looking on,

Shame to be overcome or over-reacht
Would utmost vigor raise, and rais'd unite.
Why shouldst not thou like sense within thee feel
When I am present, and thy trial choose
With me, best witness of thy Vertue tri'd. (PL IX.309-17)

At least part of his argument makes sense. He notes that virtue is built up in community – something that is less true of the world post-fall (see PL X.884) – and that both she and he are more likely to remain obedient if they are together. “Vertue tri’d” is something that Adam expects, even in a state of innocence, and wants to prepare for. Thomas H. Blackburn rightly points out a connection between the unfallen state of virtue and the state that Milton wants for his readers. Virtue in *Paradise Lost* comes as a result of trial, even for unfallen creatures.

To insist then, as many have, that man becomes faced with moral questions only when he is fallen, and thus lives an interesting and dramatic life only then, is to misunderstand not only the conception of innocence in *Paradise Lost*, but also the ideal of virtuous freedom and morality so eloquently set forth in *Areopagitica*. (132)

Man, angel, and Messiah all undergo trials through which their virtue is tested. Similarly, the reader of *Paradise Lost*, existing outside the poem, can progress towards true virtue through the experience of reading, as long as the source remains the truth of Scripture. Trials are good as long as you stick close to your guide.

But once again, we are left wondering about Adam's perceived source of his own strength (and Eve's). Like the Earth receives warmth from the sun, he receives virtue from her looks. Is he acting in the belief that his virtue comes primarily from God or from his relationship to his wife?

Eve's relationship to virtue might be the most thought-provoking. In Book V, the narrator describes Eve as "vertue-proof" in her nakedness (PL V.384), probably meaning "proof through virtue" rather than "proof against virtue," almost as if she is literally clothed with virtue. Later, Adam declares that it was Eve's virtue that caused her to turn away from him when they first met (VIII.502). For her, virtue is more like protection than strength. Eve is aware of this aspect of her virtue, which is most of the reason why she wants to separate from Adam in Book IX, leading to their disagreement about what exactly constitutes obedience. Eve claims that she will never know the strength of her virtue until she tests it. Adam counters that she doesn't have to do so alone. Eve wins the argument of course, and, when they part, Adam leaves her with this line:

rely on what thou hast of virtue; summon all

for God towards thee hath done his part, do thine. (PL IX.374)

According to Adam, God has given Eve all the virtue that she needs to withstand temptation. So how does the breakdown of virtue happen? Throughout Book IX, Eve, prompted by Satan, begins to ascribe virtue to the fruit of the forbidden tree. The tree has "vertue to make wise" (IX.778), which translates into the virtue of the tree, etc. Satan also tells Eve that, far from punishing her for disobedience, God will praise her "dauntless virtue" in eating the fruit. Just as in every other situation, Satan has made it his goal to undermine the authority of God. Here, he does it by implicitly questioning the source of virtue in the world. Is virtue something that comes from God, or is it something that Man (Eve, in this situation) can attain on his own? Satan is the first one to

praise the power of the fruit, which Eve calls him out on (PL IX.616), though she is more concerned by his “overpraising,” as she calls it, than by the idea that a snake could gain speech by eating something.

It’s worth noting that Satan himself never ascribes virtue to the fruit of the tree. Instead, he plants seeds in Eve’s mind through flattery, appealing to her sense of injured merit, the same motive that caused him to rebel in the very beginning (PL I.98). All it takes is for Satan to suggest that Eve deserves more than what she has been given – even to suggest that God will praise her “dauntless virtue” in taking initiative (IX.694). Eve completes the rest of the temptation herself. She is completely taken in by her own folly. She calls the tree and the fruit virtuous (IX.745, 973), and it isn’t long before Adam follows her lead and uses the term “virtuous” to describe the tree. Once they’ve forgotten the sole source of all virtue, anything is up for grabs.

Paradise Regained deals with the same questions of virtue’s source and continuation. The devil is the first to mention virtue in the shorter epic, in Book I, when he bemoans the growth of the Son to “youths full flowr, displaying / All vertue, grace, and wisdom to atchieve / Things highest, greatest” (PR I.67-69). Satan is back on his heels here, worried about what might come to pass now that the Son of God is on Earth in human form. This is not the first Satan’s heard about this, however (PR I.66). The danger is compounded now that Jesus has grown both physically and in virtue.

Jesus is called the Father’s “filial Vertue” by the angel choirs (I.177), a title given to him by the Father, so sure they are of victory and final glory. As a divine Person, the Son is complete, already filled to fullness with virtue. In his human nature, however – no less innocent than his divine nature – Jesus does grow, and as he wanders in the desert, he recalls his mother encouraging him to do so.

...high are thy thoughts

O Son, but nourish them and let them soar
To what highth sacred vertue and true worth
Can raise them, though above example high;
By matchless Deeds express thy matchless Sire. (PR I.229-34)

The rest of the poem is a debate between Satan and Jesus about the true nature of virtue, with Satan predominating. The devil continually makes claims about what virtue consists of and where it comes from, claims which Jesus repudiates. The Son even goes so far as to expose the wisdom of the pagan philosophers as attempts to “in themselves seek vertue, and to themselves / All glory arrogate, to God give none” (PR IV.314-15). “Jesus recognizes that there can be no freedom, for either the ruler or the ruled, without the internal bounty of virtue that is produced through virtuous cooperation with the divine [Word]” (Hampton 216). In his humility, Christ rejects the temptation that Satan presents: to locate the source of all true virtue in something other than God.

Milton held to a hierarchy of being that placed God at the top, followed by angels, man, the animal kingdom, and on down to plants and inanimate objects. The happiness of all created beings lies in recognizing and accepting their placement in that hierarchy. John Steadman puts it this way: “To perform his proper function and offices and to observe his proper end, the rational creature must recognize his peculiar position in the scale of being and the distinctive properties which differentiate him from other creatures and from God” (qtd. in Walker 103). Notably, virtue does not exist in a one-to-one relationship to creaturely happiness. God will ensure that His will is done whether or not angels or men reject their own “happy lot.” In this sense, even sin and death are “virtuous” in the sense of being oriented to God’s good (118). In an ironic scene, Sin attributes

Satan's success in the garden to his virtue (PL X.372), never imagining that God intends to use Satan's victory to defeat him and bring about something even more glorious.

Though God can bring good out of evil, the virtue of created beings only grows as long as the creature continues in obedience. To quote William Walker again,

Milton envisions every characteristic of unfallen human nature as a characteristic that qualifies it in one way or another to live as God wishes. That is what it means to be made perfect, as God and Raphael say they are and as Adam and Eve know they are (V.524, VIII.642, X150): it is to be constituted in such a way that all of one's characteristics enable and even dispose and make it easy for (but do not force) one to achieve one's purpose well and with ease. (107)

The whole question of virtue, therefore, is really a question of who God is, since it is both toward Him that all of Creation is oriented and from Him that all of Creation originates. Everything in the world, including the incarnate Jesus, either exists in sync with these created characteristics or does not, and since everything in the world exists in time, virtue must be a continued state of being over time. Before the Fall, that state of being was as natural as breathing. Once Adam and Eve disobey – of their own free will – that state of being begins to tend away from God and needs constant refreshment and care (and assistance) to return to Him. Another word for that constant care might be a “habit.”

Stephen Fallon points out that, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton only uses the word “habit” by itself (as opposed to “inhabit” or “habituation”) to refer to clothing, and then only negatively (187). Fallon means this as an argument against a Miltonic view of “virtue as habit,” but it raises an interesting connection between virtue and clothing. After the fall, Adam and Eve examine each

other and realize that they have been stripped of their virtue, like freshly shaved Samsons. What was there to protect them – what made Eve “vertue-proof” – has been removed as a result of their disobedience. In a beautiful moment in the poem, the Son clothes Adam and Eve in skins

Nor hee thir outward onely with the Skins
Of Beasts, but inward nakedness, much more
Opprobrious, with his Robe of righteousness,
Araying cover'd from his Fathers sight. (PL X.220-23)

Though stripped of all their virtue, they find themselves clothed in the righteousness of their future Savior. The Son has restored their habit of virtue to them.

Is it accurate to say that virtue in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* is a habit of doing good? We can certainly say that disobedience leads to a loss of virtue, but what about the positive side – does obedience lead to virtue? In Milton’s two epics, characters do grow in virtue, but virtue itself grows as well, because virtue is tied to a specific individual. Of all things in the world, only Jesus is able to simultaneously participate in the sinful world and not give in to its pressures, on account of his two natures, human and divine. Without Christ’s example, sacrifice, and brotherhood, mankind can’t gain purchase and can’t ever regain their lost innocence. The beginning of virtue, even in a fallen world (PL I.483), is recognizing the goodness of that sacrifice, as Michael reminds Adam (PL XII.575-587). That goes for Milton’s readers as well as his characters.

As Milton states in the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, his goal is to assert Providence, which means justifying how God can be the source of virtue in a world where Sin and Death run rampant. Milton believed virtue was made perfect through trial, in an unfallen world as well as in a fallen one. If the incarnation of the Son of God is what brings Man closer to God than ever before, then the

Fall, as the greatest trial, provides the greatest opportunity for growth in virtue. Without the Fall, the Son would not have been made incarnate and thus, would not be an example of true virtue for Milton's readers to follow in order to return to the ultimate good and their source of true happiness. In that sense, *Paradise Lost* is the ultimate tool for training through a habit of meditation, because without the events that it relates and invites the reader to meditate on, there would be no chance of growing in virtue at all, either for Milton's characters or for fallen humanity.

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