The Lady of *Comus*

and

Eve of *Paradise Lost*

A Seminar Report
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
Wisconsin State University - LaCrosse

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in the Teaching of Language and Literature

by
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April 27, 1971

WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY--LA CROSSE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

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May 13, 1971 — Date

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May 13, 1971 — Date

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THE LADY OF COMUS AND EVE OF PARADISE LOST

ABSTRACT

Within the massive structure of his greatest work, Paradise Lost, Milton has created a powerful and unique character in epic literature. With skill mastered through the years, Milton presents a woman who embodies ideal womanhood, who realistically falls into disgrace, and who ultimately evokes our sympathy. This warm and human treatment of Eve in Paradise Lost is a marked change from Milton's earlier treatment of the cold and allegorical Lady of The Mask at Ludlow Castle.

Although the Lady of the masque consistently does the right thing, she remains pure aspiration because of her lack of identity with human weakness. Her method of defending virtue against vice is permeated with un-Christian scorn, superhuman strength, and cold defiance which leaves the reader puzzled and somewhat repulsed. Eve, however, is portrayed as a loving, human person with tendencies toward evil. Her struggle with weakness, her need for others, and her repentance make her one with mankind.

Temptation and the triumph of good over evil are often stressed in Milton's writings. Unfortunately, the Lady does not evoke our sympathy for her plight nor admiration for her victory. It is the purpose of this paper to show that, while the Lady of the masque fails to inspire, Eve becomes a fit vessel in which to

embody Milton's ideas of womanhood, marriage, and Christian love.

The diverse writing power of John Milton mounted steadily upward until it culminated in the creative genius of Paradise Lost. Within its massive structure, Milton enlarged his creative powers and over-reached all of his earlier works in this cosmic epic. In Milton's literary masterpiece, Eve, the ideal woman and archetype of all temptresses, becomes a powerful and unique character in epic literature. With skill mastered through the years, Milton succeeds in portraying a woman who embodies ideal womanhood, who realistically falls into disgrace, and who ultimately evokes our sympathy. This magnificent treatment of Eve in Paradise Lost is a noticeable improvement over the cold and allegorical Lady of his earlier work, The Mask at Ludlow Castle. While Eve becomes a fit vessel in which to embody Milton's ideas of womanhood, marriage, and Christian love, the Lady of the masque fails to inspire.

Much furor has been created in literary circles over the ambiguous presentation of the Lady in The Mask at Ludlow Castle. The critics of the Lady constitute two opposing camps: those who see the Lady as unnecessarily inhumane and those who defend Milton's right to treat the Lady as an unbending defender of virtue. Most positive critics, like E. M. W. Tillyard and Jon Lawry, project for the Lady a married future.

Tillyard, then, sees the Lady not as frigid virginity, but as a heroine who will one day marry and take her place in society.[1] Lawry, too, predicts for the Lady an ultimate union of love as foreshadowed by the epilogue.[2] W. B. C. Watkins, in turn, chides those who would chide the Lady: "No careful reader of the poem can feel that the Lady, any more than Shakespeare's Adonis, is merely a self-righteous prig; her scorn of Comus is too eloquent and moving to be lightly dismissed."[3] Nevertheless, even the most positive of critics seem to rely ultimately on the speeches of Thyrsis or the sweetness of Sabrina to explain the puzzlement caused by the Lady's portrayal of chaste virtue.

The negative critics, however, are far from lenient. M. M. Ross scoffs at Milton's twisting of the theological virtues in the mouth of the Lady.

> O Welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,
> Thou hov'ring Angel girt with golden wings
> And thou unblemish't form of Chastity...
> (ll. 214-216)[4]

Ross reacts to these lines with scorn: "Faith, Hope, and Chastity and the greatest of these is chastity! The substitution of chastity for charity is the reduction of the highest supernatural grace to a secondary practical virtue."[5] Don Cameron Allen complains that

"the innocent young maiden of the early poem becomes a mulier doctissima with the stern frigidity of an adolescent Isabella."[6] Perhaps the most scathing condemnation of the presentation of chastity through the ambiguous Lady comes from Roy Daniells. "It is neither a good masque nor a good play. The villain is a more attractive figure than the heroine so that his name stands as the title by general agreement. Even what Milton intends by 'chastity' or 'virginity,' although absolutely central to an understanding of the piece, has puzzled commentators."[7]

Although Comus, as the masque is popularly called, contains fine poetry and several of the elements of the traditional masque, many critics agree with Daniells that the personage of the Lady leaves much to be desired. This paragon of chaste virtue ultimately leaves us as cold and indifferent as her nameless state implies. Somehow the Lady in Comus fails to inspire admiration, either in her person or in her stone-like chastity. If Milton were as enamored of virginity as this masque indicates, he has failed to create a fit vessel in which to enshrine his ideals. It is almost sad that the villain, as villains often do, becomes a trifle more attractive and a great deal more real than the heroine.

Comus, who combines the characteristics of a fertility god with that of a Satanic tempter, introduces

the Lady's unusual strength of virtue. He scatters his riotous band because he senses the approach of a virgin who might be frightened by their appearance:

> Break off, break off, I feel a different pace
> Of some chaste footing near upon this ground.
> Run to your shrouds within these Brakes and Trees;
> Our number may affright: Some Virgin sure
> (For so I can distinquish by mine Art)
> Benighted in these Woods... (ll. 145-150)

Thus, before the heroine even enters the scene, we are aware of her great virtue and its far-reaching powers. Her very footstep, chaste and holy, serves as a harbinger to the evil Comus, allowing him time to disband his noisy dancers.

The Lady, separated from her brothers in a dark wood filled with evil, enters the play in a state of perfect trust in faith, hope, and chastity:

> O welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,
> Thou hov'ring Angel girt with golden wings,
> And thou unblemish't form of Chastity,
> I see ye visibly, and now believe
> That he, the Supreme good, t' whom all things ill
> Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,

> Would send a glist'ring Guardian, if need were,
> To keep my life unassail'd.
> (ll. 214-220)

Moreover, she is presented as so wedded to good that her senses are immediately attuned to evil warnings as she approaches the sensual Comus and his bestial followers:

> This way the noise was, if mine ear be true,
> My best guide now; methought it was the sound
> Of Riot and ill-manag'd Merriment,
> Such as the jocund Flute or gamesome Pipe
> Stirs up among the losse unletter'd Hinds,
> When for their teeming Flocks and granges full
> In wanton dance they praise the bounteous Pan,
> And thank the gods amiss....
> (ll. 170-177)

In answer to the Lady's song to Echo, Comus appears on the scene as her "deliverer," and the Lady's outward beauty, an indication of inward goodness to a Renaissance audience, immediately captures the eye and heart of the evil Comus, who must have her for his queen. Even the daemonic god of sensuality recognizes her holiness and is awed by it:

> Can any mortal mixture of Earth's mold
> Breathe such Divine enchanting ravishment?

> Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
> And with these raptures moves the vocal air
> To testify his hidd'n recidence....
> (ll. 244-248)

These lines, spoken by the villain, constitute perhaps the warmest description of the Lady in the entire masque. The sweetness of her song to Echo and Comus' warm description have prepared us for a tender Lady, needful of help. All too soon, she will prove otherwise.

Meanwhile, the two brothers are diligently searching for their lost sister. The practical Younger Brother is genuinely worried about her welfare: "But O that hapless virgin our lost sister./ Where may she wander now, whither betake her/ From the chill dew, amongst rude burs and thistles" (ll. 350-353)? The Older Brother, however, has no cause for fearing and, echoing his sister's confidence, tells the younger that a hidden strength will aid the Lady:

> I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength
> Which if Heav'n gave it, may be term'd her own:
> 'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
> She that has that, is clad in complete steel,
> And like a quiver's Nymph with Arrows keen
> May trace hugh Forests and unharbor'd Heaths,
> Infamous Hills and sandy perilous wilds,
> Where through the sacred rays of Chastity,

No savage fierce, Bandit or mountaineer
Will dare to soil her Virgin purity ....
(ll. 418-427)

Both the Lady and the Older Brother seem to know that a sense of moral uprightness will be one's protection or that it will call down protection for one against the evils that lurk in the woods. The reader senses little here of a fallen creature and misses the Lady's recognition of her dependency on her Maker for strength. By the descriptive words of the Older Brother, the Lady becomes "an autonomy of individual will and spirit."[8] The Lady, then, immediately takes on an aura of complete sinlessness ("To keep my life and honor unassail'd ..." [l.220]), making her almost inhuman; she becomes so allegorically perfect that it is humanly impossible to identify with her. Unlike the sinless Eve who will fall, the Lady begins, presumedly, as a fallen creature who cannot be tempted. We soon realize that the Lady actually is presented as not of our fallen condition. She seems almost to be filled with unnatural pride in her own strengths, rather than filled with Christian reliance and wariness. Truly, the Christian should be known by his fallen nature and by his loving and humble attempt to overcome it. In his struggle to overcome evil, he identifies with his fellow creatures and reaches out to them in Christian love. But the Lady has no sense of sin, only of strength. We are almost forced to be

repulsed by a self-righteousness so lacking in Christian love and humility.[9]

With the simplicity of beguiled trust, the Lady follows Comus to his palace of sin. Here, under his diabolical spell, she sits frozen to a banquet chair. Ironically, and hardly intended by Milton, her physical immobility is an apt form for her frozen personality. In this setting, the battle of wits begins between the tempter Comus and the chaste Lady. The whole temptation scene becomes one of philosophical argumentation. Perhaps, then, one of the reasons Comus never seems quite so repulsive in comparison to the frigid Lady is because we are always told how evil he is, but we never really see his evil. He is a seducer who does very little to seduce. "Instead of offering the Lady his magic brew while she is wandering alone, unsuspecting, and thirsty in the forest, he brings her into a palace, lets her see his troop of roughly-headed monsters, and only then, when she is thoroughly aroused and suspicious, tries to argue her into drinking of the cup."[10] Comus, however evil, exudes a sense of warmth and good-naturedness in his arguments and gains by comparison to the Lady, who reacts with rather un-Christian scorn, defiance, and contempt. By appeals to nature, Comus tries to undermine the Lady's unbending adherence to chastity.

List Lady, be not coy, and be not cozen'd
With that same vaunted name Virginity;
Beauty is nature's Coin, must not be hoarded;
But must be current, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual and partak'n bliss,
Unsavory in th' enjoyment of itself.
(ll. 737-742)

The Lady, however, reacts violently to the use of reason and nature in such a deceptive way. With vigorous, cold logic, she argues back:

Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes,
Obtruding false rules prankt in reason's garb.
I hate when vice can bolt her arguments,
And virtue has no tongue to check her pride:
Imposter, do not charge most innocent nature,
As if she would her children should be riotous
With her abundance; she, good cateress,
Means her provision only to the good
That live according to her sober laws
And holy dictate of spare Temperance.
(ll. 758-767)

It is this type of philosophical interchange that has caused Enid Welsford to label the masque a "dramatized debate."[11] How long this verbal interchange of virtue versus vice would continue we do not know, as the brothers rush in to save the Lady, who hardly appears to

need saving. We are totally convinced by now that no harm could possibly befall her, because she's not really a human, but an ideal. At this point in the masque, we are thoroughly aware of how allegorical the Lady really is--she is pure aspiration.[12] The Lady is what humanity can only aspire to be--unfaltering prefection. There is never the remotest indication that she could possibly waver. All dramatic tension is immediately lost when we realize that the whole temptation scene is pure philosophical argumentation and that the outcome is stacked in favor of the Lady. She is cold strength of will before the verbal assaults of Comus, and her physical immobility in no way hinders her freedom of mind. She is not a human who is chaste; she is Chastity. The argument is really between sun-clad Chastity and Comus, and there is not the slightest chance that Comus' magic can overcome the powers of Chastity. Her brothers will cause Comus to flee, and Sabrina, who beautifully represents a virgin involved in Christian giving, will remove the spell and release the Lady from the chair. She may have needed this physical help to preserve her virginity (although we are given no indication that Comus would dare to assault her physically), but she certainly needed no spiritual assistance to preserve her chastity. The moral integrity of the Lady never needed help; she is perfect self-control, staunch will

power, and verbal victor.

Her seemingly inhuman aloofness is augmented by her total lack of interaction with the rest of the characters. After being saved by her brothers and after having gained her physical freedom through the powers of Sabrina, the Lady coldly fades into the background without so much as a nodding, "Thank you":

> Her intolerable pride and self-sufficiency disqualified her from the dignity of a willing martyr and now, having been awkwardly rescued by a mixture of force and natural magic, she shows neither gratitude nor humility. Stepping from the cartouche of majestic innocence, she dwindles into a little girl who has got out of a nasty situation in the woods and had better hurry home.[13]

Almost with a touch of unwanted irony, the play ends in a glowing description of heavenly love. The Spirit's epilogue is in sharp contrast to the loveless Lady who has preserved her virginity but failed to evoke our admiration. C. L. Barber, however, indicates that he believes Milton presented chastity "not as a negative virtue but as an intact disposition to love."[14] This attitude, it would seem, can be reached only by a liberal

reading of the Spirit's epilogue, not by a close study of the character of the Lady. With her morals and ideals we can hardly quibble, but somehow her method seems too inhuman, too aloof, and too un-Christian. The reader of Comus, then, is forced to agree somewhat with Roy Daniells that final "admiration of the play is tempered by exasperation."[15]

Some tolerance must be given to Milton, for, as James Hanford indicates, a masque is designed to illustrate the triumph of a moral ideal.[16] D. C. Allen declares, however, that Comus is not a masque because it is too long, the cast is too small, the locale too precise, the plot too tense, and the theme too serious.[17] Welsford would allow some masque features to Comus, but she points out several deficiences. Perhaps the greatest is that the hinge of action is not on revelation or metamorphosis but an act of free will. Commenting on Milton's choice of the masque form, Welford says, "He could not see that the masque, whose presiding deity was Hymen, was a most unsuitable vehicle for the unfolding of the 'sage and serious doctrine of virginity'; he could not see that the ideal of self-righteous ascetism, which he expounds through the mouths of the virtuous characters, is incompatible with the ideal of the golden world of beauty which pervades so much of his poetry...."[18]

Tillyard, too, sees the whole use of the masque form as an unsuccessful experiment in drama.[19] Milton's genius, then, seems to strain within the narrow confines of the masque form. Perhaps he needed the wider freedom of drama in order to develop his characters more fully and expound his doctrine more acceptably. As Milton's imagination and creativity left the realm of the masque and approached the realm of the drama, he somehow failed to bring the Lady along. There are moments in the masque when the reader senses reasonable, human responses and dramatic tension. But always the drama is bogged down by the tedium of the moralistic and instructive elements. The ambiguity of the Lady is only compounded by this type of artistic strain. She is an allegorical element that never blooms dramatically within a work tending toward drama. Perhaps this mingling of forms accounts for part of the reason why the reader comes away from the work confused and annoyed.

However, in response to Tillyard, Balachandra Rajan points out that the background of the masque is not classical; it is, for this reason, an unstable genre with which Milton had the right to experiment.[20] Marjorie Nicolson states that the most important masque theme was the triumph of virtue over vice; therefore, the presentation of the Lady was wholly successful, even if "the Lady's virtue is clearly not temptable."[21] One

wonders, though, if the moral ideal needed to be presented through a mere personification of purity, rather than through a more human character. The Lady has out-talked the evil Comus through her power of reason and strength of virtue, but she fails to ever really live and breathe within the narrow confines of the limited and static action of the play. She is truly an embryonic heroine who can only faintly foreshadow the greatness of the dramatic Eve in Paradise Lost.

The literary creation of Eve, some twenty-six years later, is in sharp contrast to the allegorical Lady of Comus. Within the massive structure of Paradise Lost, she lives and breathes as one of the most lovable and universal characterizations of Eve ever to appear in literature.[22] Both women are presented as chaste, Eve representing married chastity, the Lady of Comus representing virginity. Yet how different is the presentation of these two chaste women. The older brother in Comus describes his sister's chastity as one that clads her in "complete steel" (l. 421), making the Lady completely invulnerable. Eve, however, is soft, sensual, and goddess-like in her innocent nakedness:

> For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace...
> (Book IV, l. 298)

> Shee as a veil down to the slender waist

Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd....
(Book IV, ll. 304-306)

Under his forming hands a creature grew,
Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair....
(Book VIII, ll. 470-471)

Grace was in all her steps, Heav'n in her Eye,
In every gesture dignity and love.
(Book VIII, ll. 489-490)

...yet when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her
Loses discount'nanc't, and like folly shows;
Authority and Reason on her wait,
As one intended first, not after made
Occasionally; and to consummate all,
Greatness of mind and nobleness thir seat
Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
About her, as a guard Angelic plac't.
(Book VIII, ll. 546-559)

She and Adam represent the highest qualities of unfallen humanity, embodying such admirable characteristics

as youth, integrity, and purity.[23] Their evening prayer indicates a well-ordered life filled with the happiness of mutual love and work:

> Thou also mad'st the Night,
> Maker Omnipotent, and thou the Day,
> Which we in our appointed work imploy'd
> Have finisht happy in our mutual help
> And mutual love, the crown of all our bliss....
> (Book IV, ll. 724-728)

Adam and Eve are primarily lovers in the garden, conveying a sense of warm comradeship in their response to one another. The tender interchange of dialogue between Adam and his amorous spouse is glaringly different from the lack of any loving interaction of the Lady in Comus with the other characters. Eve, who converses often with Adam, even leaves the company of Adam and the Angel Raphael, not because she cannot understand their lofty discourse, but because "such pleasure she reserv'd,/ Adam relating, she sole Auditress;/ Her husband the Relater she preferr'd/ Before the Angel...." (Book VIII, ll. 50-53). Truly, Eve is the ideal mate of Milton's Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce;[24] she is not just sensual delight, but one who can "perform the best duty of marriage in a cheerful and agreeable conversation," which to Milton was "the noblest end

Book IX. When first created, Eve became enamored with her own reflection in a pool, preferring it to Adam:

> As I bent down to look, just opposite,
> A Shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd
> Bending to look on me, I started back,
> It started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd
> Pleas'd it return'd as soon with answering looks
> Of sympathy and love; there I had fixt
> Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire,
> .....
> Till I espi'd thee, fair indeed and tall,
> Under a Platan, yet methought less fair,
> Less winning soft, less amiably mild,
> Than that smooth wat'ry image; back I turn'd....
> (Book IV, ll. 460-480)

This hint of self-love foreshadows her vain desire for inordinate knowledge, a means of making herself superior to Adam. Both women, actually, are proud. The Lady is clad in the coldness of self-righteous pride; Eve is shrouded in humanness and proudly reaches out for god-like greatness. The Lady's pride seems to be offered as a virtue; Eve's is clearly a human fault. While the Lady becomes purely allegorical virtue, it is Eve who embodies human weakness by sinning.

Although some critics question Eve's innocence

at this point in the epic, stating that she has already been portrayed as sinful,[25] they overlook one of the most obvious differences between Milton's creation of Eve and the Lady of Comus. The Lady is not, cannot, and will never be sinful; she is not characterized as having any tendencies toward evil. Eve is portrayed as human, though unfallen. The tendency toward evil must be present in order to convince the reader that Eve is a truly free person who need not, but could fall. Milton has taken great pains in the presentation of Eve as an ideal person who nevertheless has inclinations toward evil. She is presented as basically good, but not necessarily static in her goodness. The critics who see Eve as already fallen before the actual disobedient act overlook Milton's emphasis on a still innocent Eve after she has parted from Adam's protective side:

> O much deceiv'd, much failing, hapless Eve,
> Of thy presum'd return! event perverse!
> Thou never from that hour in Paradise
> Found'st either sweet repast, or sound repose:
> Such ambush hid among sweet Flow'rs and Shades
> Waited with hellish rancor imminent
> To intercept thy way, or send thee back
> Despoil'd of Innocence, of Faith, of Bliss...
> (Book IX, ll. 404-411)

> Such pleasure took the Serpent to behold
> This Flow'ry Plat, the sweet recess of Eve
> Thus early, thus alone; her Heav'nly form
> Angelic, but more soft, and Feminine,
> Her graceful Innocence....
> (Book IX, ll. 455-459)

> To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the Fruit
> Of each Tree in the Garden we may eat,
> But of the Fruit of this fair Tree amidst....
> The Garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat
> Thereof, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die....
> (Book IX, ll. 659-663)
> (Italics mine)

Eve, then, is not sinful before the fall. Temptation or inclinations to sin are not in themselves sin, and although Milton has given us a perfect woman, he has indicated that imperfection is a possibility. It is precisely this tendency toward vanity and self-love that the devil will use to pry Eve away from her obedience to God's command.

The temptation scenes of both poems present another interesting contrast, that of tone. The banquet scene in Comus is filled with cold defiance as the Lady wields reason like a sword against unsound, but enticing, arguments of Comus. Never does she falter in her war against vice, mouthing such strong words as "fool," "false traitor," "lewdly-pamper'd," "swinish gluttony,"

"profane tongue," and "contemptuous word." Never is there intended to be any hint that the Lady could possibly be swayed by the soothing arguments of Comus. Her final words in the masque leave little doubt that she is, indeed, "clad in complete steel" (l. 421):

> Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth
> Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
> To such a flame of sacred vehemence,
> That dumb things would be mov'd to sympathize,
> And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,
> Till all thy magic structures rear'd so high,
> Were shatter'd into heaps o'er thy false head.
> (ll. 793-799)

Surprisingly, the force of her words even casts fear into the evil heart of Comus, who should have had the upper hand:

> She fables not, I feel that I do fear
> Her words set off by some superior power;
> And though not mortal, yet a cold shudd'ring dew
> Dips me all o'er, as when the wrath of Jove
> Speaks thunder and the chains of Erebus
> To some of Saturn's crew....
> (ll. 800-805)

It is a strange state of affairs when the tempted frightens

the tempter. Her words, then, are strong enough to recall to Comus the awful powers of the gods. The Lady's tone is one of psychological superiority over her captor. She is frozen to a chair and, seemingly, in physical danger, and yet she commands a tone of scorn, defiance, and self-assuredness that belongs to Jove and the gods, not to a woman in danger.

The tone of Eve's temptation scene is more subtle, stressing human weakness, rather than unnatural strength. Eve has deliberately left the side of her protector, in spite of her dream and the angel's warning. In her discussion with Adam on the merits of working alone, Eve uses arguments that sound much like those of Areopagitica:[26] "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary..." (Areopagitica, p. 728). Thus, Eve counters Adam's arguments by saying, "And what is Faith, Love, Virtue unassy'd/ Alone, without exterior help sustain'd?"(Book IX, ll. 335-336). In demanding the right to work alone, Eve becomes even more of an individual and human character, asserting her naive self-confidence and adventurous spirit.[27] While the Lady is confident that she cannot sin, Eve is confident that she will not be tempted. The Lady is shocked to think Comus would consider her temptable; Eve does not in the least convince the reader of an unnatural strength against evil,

only of her naivete. By moving away from Adam when danger was knowingly great, Eve has upset the whole domestic scene. Her upper hand in the discussion is almost humorous until we realize the sad consequences of Eve's wilfulness and her total ignorance of the devil's ways:

> With thy permission then, and thus forewarn'd
> Chiefly by what thy own last reasoning words
> Touch'd only, that our trial, when least sought,
> May find us both perhaps far less prepar'd,
> The willinger I go, nor much expect
> A foe so proud will first the weaker seek;
> So bent, the more shall shame him his repulse.
> (Book IX, ll. 378-384)

Unlike the Lady, Eve is headed for danger by this human quality of head-strong wilfulness. She certainly need not fall, but by now we know she is capable of falling. Our sympathy for her plight is doubly evoked because the weight of responsibility for her safety lay with Adam, who neglected his duty and allowed Eve, vulnerable and naive, to wander the garden alone.[29]

Playing on Eve's sense of vanity, the devil lavishly praises her beauty, elevating her to the status of a goddess:

> Wonder not, sovran Mistress, if perhaps

Thou canst, who are sole Wonder, much less arm
Thy looks, the Heav'n of mildness, with disdain,
Displeas'd that I approach thee thus, and gaze
Insatiate, I thus single, nor have fear'd
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
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, ador'd and serv'd
By Angels numberless, thy daily Train.
(Book IX, ll. 532-548)

How similar this is to the praise Comus uses to beguile the Lady when he first approaches her. Comus says in praise of her:

... Hail foreign wonder,
Whom certain these rough shades did never breed,
Unless the Goddess that in rural shrine
Dwell'st here with Pan or Silvan, by blest Song
Forbidding every bleak unkindly Fog
To touch the prosperous growth of this tall Wood.
(ll. 265-270)

Both are greeted by their tempters as goddesses, but it is the vainly human Eve who is taken in by such obvious flattery. "Into the Heart of Eve his words made way" (Book IX, l. 550).

Like the Lady, Eve innocently follows her tempter to the place of temptation. The walk to the tree gives Eve time to whet her curiosity and to increase her anticipation.[30] Her surprised words do not ring with harshness, although she is genuinely disappointed by the sight of the forbidden tree:

> Serpent, we might have spar'd our coming hither,
> Fruitless to mee, though Fruit be here to excess,
> The credit of whose virtue rest with thee,
> Wondrous indeed, if cause of such effect.
> But of the Tree we may not taste nor touch;
> God so commanded, and left that Command
> Sole Daughter of his voice; the rest, we live
> Law to ourselves, our Reason is our Law.
> (Book IX, ll. 647-654)

After more coaxing by the devil, Eve pauses in deliberation before she sins, and the argument is not with the tempter, but with herself:

> He ended, and his words replete with guile
> Into her heart too easy entrance won:
> Fixt on the Fruit she gaz'd, which to behold

> Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound
> Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregn'd
> With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth;
> Meanwhile the hour of Noon drew on, and wak'd
> An eager appetite, rais'd by the smell
> So savory of that Fruit, which with desire,
> Inclinable now grown to touch or taste,
> Solicited her longing eye; yet first
> Pausing a while, thus to herself she mus'd.
> (Book IX, ll. 733-744)

While in Comus the Lady aims harsh words at her seducer, Eve dialogues with her own weakness-- deliberate disobedience, but tinged with pathos. It is high noon, and, like the Lady whose brothers left her to search for water, Eve is hungry. The fruit is doubly enticing; it will satisfy the need for food and the desire for god-likeness. The Lady in the masque is tempted by Comus to be less than natural; Eve is tempted to be supernatural:[31]

> Here grows the Cure of all, this Fruit Divine,
> Fair to the Eye, inviting to the Taste,
> Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then
> To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind?
> So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
> Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck'd, she eat:

> Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
> Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,
> That all was lost....
> (Book IX, ll. 776-784)

Even in deepest sin, Eve cannot mouth the violent-sounding words of the Lady. The critic Watkins, who staunchly defends the person of the Lady in Comus, seems to contradict himself when he states, "She would have been safe, but how much less human and less amiable, if like the Lady in Comus she had only clung, stubborn and incurious, to faith and obedience.[32] Indeed, even if Eve had not sinned, she still would be far more human and amiable than the Lady. Her loving nature, her human weakness, and her wavering dialogue with self as she leans toward evil would assure her a more solid position than the Lady with the rest of humanity. Unlike the Lady's, her temptation scene ends on a loving tone: "So dear I love him, that with him all death/ I could endure, without him live no life" (Book IX, ll. 832-834). From the first moments of her creation until her temptation, we have been made to see Eve as a warm, human person, and we are not surprised by her disobedience, only saddened.

In the moments of elation that follow the eating of the forbidden fruit, Eve's first thought is not to tell Adam of her rebellious deed and thereby possess

a superiority over him:

> But to Adam in what sort
> Shall I appear? shall I to him make known
> As yet my change, and give him to partake
> Full happiness with mee, or rather not,
> But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power
> Without Copartner? so to add what wants
> In Female Sex, the more to draw his Love,
> And render me more equal, and perhaps,
> A thing not undesirable, sometime
> Superior: for inferior who is free?
> (Book IX, ll. 814-825)

Immediately following this proud thought, she momentarily becomes the Eve we have grown to love when she decides that all things must be shared with Adam "in bliss or Woe" (Book IX, l. 831). Perhaps the greatest sin Eve commits is that of tempting Adam to the evil she has espoused. The tempted turns tempter and beguiles her mate with loving words.

> ...that I
> Have also tasted, and have also found
> Th' effects to correspond, opener mine Eyes,
> Dim erst, dilated Spirits, ampler Heart,
> And growing up to Godhead: which for thee
> Chiefly I sought, without thee can despise.

> For bliss, as thou hast part, to me is bliss,
> Tedious, unshar'd with thee, and odious soon.
> Thou therefore also taste, that equal Lot
> May join us, equal Joy, as equal Love;
> Lest thou not tasting, different degree
> Disjoin us, and I then too late renounce
> Deity for thee, when Fate will not permit.
> (Book IX, ll. 873-885)

Eve's wanting to share all with her beloved is also humanly sad, especially if that to be shared is expected to bring "equal Joy" (Book IX, l. 882). Once Adam has eaten, the initial sin is followed by a whole host of sins: adoration, orgy, hatred, drunkenness, self-love, and alienation.

> They sat them down to weep, nor only Tears
> Rain'd at thir Eyes, but high Winds worse within
> Began to rise, high Passions, Anger, Hate,
> Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shook sore
> Thir inward State of Mind,.....
> (Book IX, ll. 1121-1125)

After the fall, Eve is still physically beautiful, but momentarily self-pitying. She attempts to place the blame on Adam's lack of proper use of authority: "Being as I am, why didst not thou the Head/ Command me absolutely not to go" (Book IX, ll. 1155-1156). This typically human quality of refusing to face personal guilt is as near as Eve ever gets to the cold harshness of the

Lady in Comus. Refusal to admit guilt, however, is short-lived in the tender Eve. In the face of judgment, she readily and simply admits, "The Serpent me beguil'd and I did eat (Book X, l. 162).

Eve's recognition of her need for repentance adds another human quality to her characterization. We cannot help but be moved by her tender plea to Adam and God for forgiveness:

> Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness Heav'n
> What love sincere, and reverence in my heart
> I bear thee, and unweeting have offended,
> Unhappily deceiv'd; thy suppliant
> I beg, and clasp thy knees...
> ...On me exercise not
> Thy hatred for this misery befall'n
> On me already lost, mee than thyself
> More miserable; both have sinn'd, but thou
> Against God only, I against God and thee,
> And to the place of judgment will return,
> There with my cries importune Heaven, that all
> The sentence from thy head remov'd may light
> On me....
>
> (Book X, ll. 914-936)

Nothing is more human than a fallen creature who acknowledges his dependence and begs forgiveness. As

Eve has led Adam to sin, she will lead him to repentance.[33] The Lady in the masque never interacts with any of the other characters besides Comus; she plays her part upon the stage and then quietly retires to the wings. No other character has been changed nor helped by her presence. However, Eve, with tears and tenderness, will drive the hatred from the heart of Adam. Because she needs forgiveness, Eve can give forgiveness. She can not only forgive the hateful words of Adam, but she can also admit her guilt without haranguing her tempter. Unlike the Lady in Comus who dares her tempter to "arm his profane tongue with contemptous words/ Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity" (ll. 780-782), Eve's final words for her tempter are "that cruel Serpent" (Book X, l. 927). Indeed, with the help of the cruel serpent, Eve has brought Adam to sin, but her sincere sorrow and her sense of guilt are not wasted on Adam or the reader:

> ... soon his heart relented
> Towards her, his life so late and sole delight,
> Now at his feet submissive in distress
> Creature so fair his reconcilement seeking,
> His counsel whom she had displeas'd, his aid;
> As one disarm'd, his anger all he lost ....
> (Book X, ll. 940-945)

Eve has opened Pandora's box, and she struggles desperately to give solace to Adam. From the depths

of her woe, Eve suggests that they remain childless or, if this proves too difficult, that they seek death. Even in the midst of the emotional drain of repentance and reconciliation, she is ready to give, to sacrifice all she knows. Ultimately, she will be called upon to sacrifice all she knows by way of homeland, but this, too, she will accept in a loving, sacrificial way:

> Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
> In mee is no delay; with thee to go,
> Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
> Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee
> Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,
> Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence.
> (Book XII, ll. 614-619)

It is Eve who truly personifies Christian womanhood by her sense of sacrifice, forgiveness, love, and devotion. It is Eve who displays Christian charity by constant giving of self, not the allegorical Lady, the paragon of chastity.

The question of temptation lies at the heart of both these works as it does in Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. Christ in Paradise Regained, while struggling in the desert with his identity, is prodded by the devil to mistrust the Father. Samson Agonistes presents a fallen hero in the state of deep depression, struggling to know God's will. Like Eve, Samson knows

his weakness and fears it. Like the Lady, Christ knows his strengths and uses them. But we allow Christ the right to do this much more readily; after all, he is divine and His work is to crush the serpent's head. But the Lady, like Eve and Samson, should be humbly aware of a sinful nature. Her temptation is not really a temptation at all; she has no freedom to choose. The Lady is preordained toward cold defiance of evil, armed with superhuman strength. For this reason, she fails to inspire; her virtue cannot be imitated.

It would seem, then, that the Milton of some twenty-six years later underwent a rather drastic change from the young man who wrote Comus. Somewhere Milton seems to have stepped from Christian idealism to Christian humanism. According to Tillyard, young Milton indicated in a letter to a friend that he temporarily had chosen celibacy as an expedient self-discipline. Tillyard sees Milton's extolling of chastity in Comus as a means of raising virginity to a mystical level, giving Milton's own life a stronger justification for celibacy. Using the following quotation from Comus to illustrate Milton's early thinking, Tillyard proposes that this type of philosophy was later to be totally disregarded:

> So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity,
> That when a soul is found sincerely so
> A thousand liveried Angels lackey her,

> Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt
> And in clear dream and solemn vision
> Tell her of thing that no gross ear can hear ....
> (ll. 453-458)

All traces of this glorification of chastity, Tillyard states, had disappeared by the writing of Paradise Lost where physical love is exalted and where even the angels enjoy physical mingling. Ending his discussion, Tillyard says, "Milton was no mystic and his dallying in Comus with a magical view of chastity was no more than an interlude."[34]

Nicolson, too, sees the young Milton as one who wrote ideas patterned on the clichés taught in Renaissance schools and universities. However, to her, the charm of the masque lies precisely in the charm of this youthful writing with a fairy tale quality about it.[35] Indeed, the arguments of Comus and the Lady do take on the youthful flavor of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso. Being taught to argue both sides, Milton may have inadvertedly stated Comus' case a trifle too well.[36]

Perhaps, then, the young Milton was trying to justify his own way of life, or perhaps he was merely using his knowledge gained in university study. One conclusion is certain: "In Comus chastity is never, even by implication, viewed in connection with the wedded love which Milton was later to hail."[37] By the time Milton

began his great epic, his ideas have definitely undergone change. His Eve is a warm, human person, reflecting the bliss of conjugal love. Unlike the Lady who, while saving her virtue, projects a person drawn within herself, Eve bespeaks Christian love through the sharing of self. The greatness of Milton's literary powers can be appreciated in both these works of art; however, even a casual reading of the two would reveal the growth of Milton's dramatic skill in the treatment of the Lady and Eve. One exists, the other lives; one preaches, the other shows; one remains totally allegorical, the other expands into a truly human character. The Lady in Comus consistently does the right thing, but Eve in Paradise Lost ultimately evokes our sympathy by radiating a more Christian attitude of love.

FOOTNOTES

[1]E. M. W. Tillyard, Studies in Milton (New York, 1951), p. 95.

[2]Jon S. Lawry, The Shadow of Heaven (Ithaca, L968), p. 95.

[3]W. B. C. Watkins, An Anatomy of Milton's Verse (Baton Rouge, 1955), p. 97.

[4]Citations from Milton in my text are to John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

[5]M. M. Ross, Poetry and Dogma (New York, 1969), p. 196.

[6]Don Cameron Allen, The Harmonious Vision (Baltimore, 1954), p. 37.

[7]Roy Daniells, Milton, Mannerism and Baroque (Toronto, 1964), p. 20.

[8]C. L. Barber, "A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle: The Mask as a Masque," in The Lyric and Dramatic Milton, ed. by Joseph Summers (New York, 1965), p. 51.

[9]Daniells, p. 28.

[10]Robert Adams, Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics (Ithaca, 1955), p. 7.

[11]Enid Welsford, The Court Masque (New York, 1962), p. 318.

[12]Daniells, p. 34.

[13]Daniells, p. 31.

[14]Barber, p. 54.

[15]Daniells, p. 20.

[16]James Hanford, A Milton Handbook (New York, 1961), p. 159.

[17]Allen, p. 24.

[18]Welsford, p. 318 and p. 320.

[19]E. M. W. Tillyard, Milton (London, 1930), p. 66.

[20]Balachandra Rajan, The Lofty Rhyme (Coral Cables, 1970), p. 26.

[21]Marjorie Nicolson, John Milton (New York, 1963), p. 80.

[22]Marianna Woodhull, The Epic of Paradise Lost (New York, 1968), p. 283.

[23]John Peter, A Critique of Paradise Lost (New York, 1960), p. 90.

[24]John G. Halkett, Milton and the Idea of Matrimony (London, 1970), p. 112.

[25]Millicent Bell in "The Fallacy of the Fall in Paradise Lost," PMLA, 70 (1955), 1192 and E. M. W. Tillyard in Studies in Milton, p. 12 have raised the question of Eve's innocence before the actual fall. Millicent Bell sees Eve's fascination by her own image in Book IV as a betrayal of sinful self-love. Bell argues that the heart is the testing ground of sin and that Eve has sinned internally long before the external act of eating forbidden fruit. Citing the dream of Eve in Book IV, Tillyard proposes that Eve passed from her state of innocence to sinfulness at this point. His proof, which is also stressed by Bell, lies in the fact that Eve was so obviously disturbed by a dream instigated by Satan. Most critics, like John Peter in A Critique of Paradise Lost, p. 100, pinpoint the actual disobedience to God's command as the moment when Eve loses innocence. Peter sees the dream sequence, when the devil squats at Eve's ear pouring tempting ideas into her sleep, as one in which Eve is a passive instrument incapable of sinning. Likewise, he excuses Eve's apparent vanity as naivete or childlike honesty.

[26]Dennis Burden, The Logical Epic (Cambridge, 1967), p. 88.

[27]B. A. Wright, Milton's Paradise Lost (New York, 1962), p. 168.

[28]Lawry, p. 241.

[29]Burden, p. 95.

[30]J. M. Evans, Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition (Oxford, 1968), p. 277.

[31]Roland Frye, God, Man, and Satan (Princeton, 1960), p. 54.

[32]Watkins, p. 133.

[33]Helen Gardner, A Reading of Paradise Lost (Oxford, 1965), p. 88.

[34]Tillyard, Milton, p. 75.

[35]Nicolson, p. 87.

[36]Tillyard, Studies in Milton, p. 87.

[37]A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's Comus," in A Maske at Ludlow, ed. by John S. Diekhoff (Cleveland, 1968), p. 30.

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