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Privacy in Paradise

WHEN MILTON CREATED PARADISE, one of his objectives was to come up with something radically different from the world in which he lived.¹ So much would be implied, I think, in his treatment of Adam and Eve's unembarrassed prelapsarian nakedness. To deny them clothing is of course not an innovation: it is consistent with the Genesis account² and with the practice of many generations of visual artists in the tradition of Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach. But Milton doesn't simply take the nakedness of Adam and Eve for granted; he insists on it in ways that go well beyond the needs of the narrative. Our first glimpse of the primal couple includes a celebration of their nakedness:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
God-like erect, with native honor clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all.³

These lines are followed by a notoriously gendered description of the first human pair: Adam is all strength and authority and appears to have regular haircuts; Eve's curves and tendrils might seem

¹ An oral version of this paper was presented at the Milton session of the annual conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English held in Ottawa in May 1998. I am grateful to the members of this group for their provocative and helpful discussion, and to my colleague John Baxter for reading my written text with a practised critical eye.

² "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25), authorized version.

³ *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton, 1975) 4.288–90. Subsequent references are to this edition.

unruly but in fact they yield to the control of Adam's gentle hand.⁴ And Milton's long description is explicitly not censored: "Nor those mysterious parts were then concealed, / Then was not guilty shame" (4.313–14). Cranach may choose to depict his couple at precisely the angle at which a luxuriant vine is masking Adam's crotch and (strange coincidence) a leafy branch is reaching up to conceal Eve's. But for Milton such strategies of disguise would imply compromise with the values of the fallen world; he rejects the protective figleaf because Adam and Eve have nothing to hide: "So passed they naked on, nor shunned the sight / Of God or angel, for they thought no ill" (4.319–20).⁵

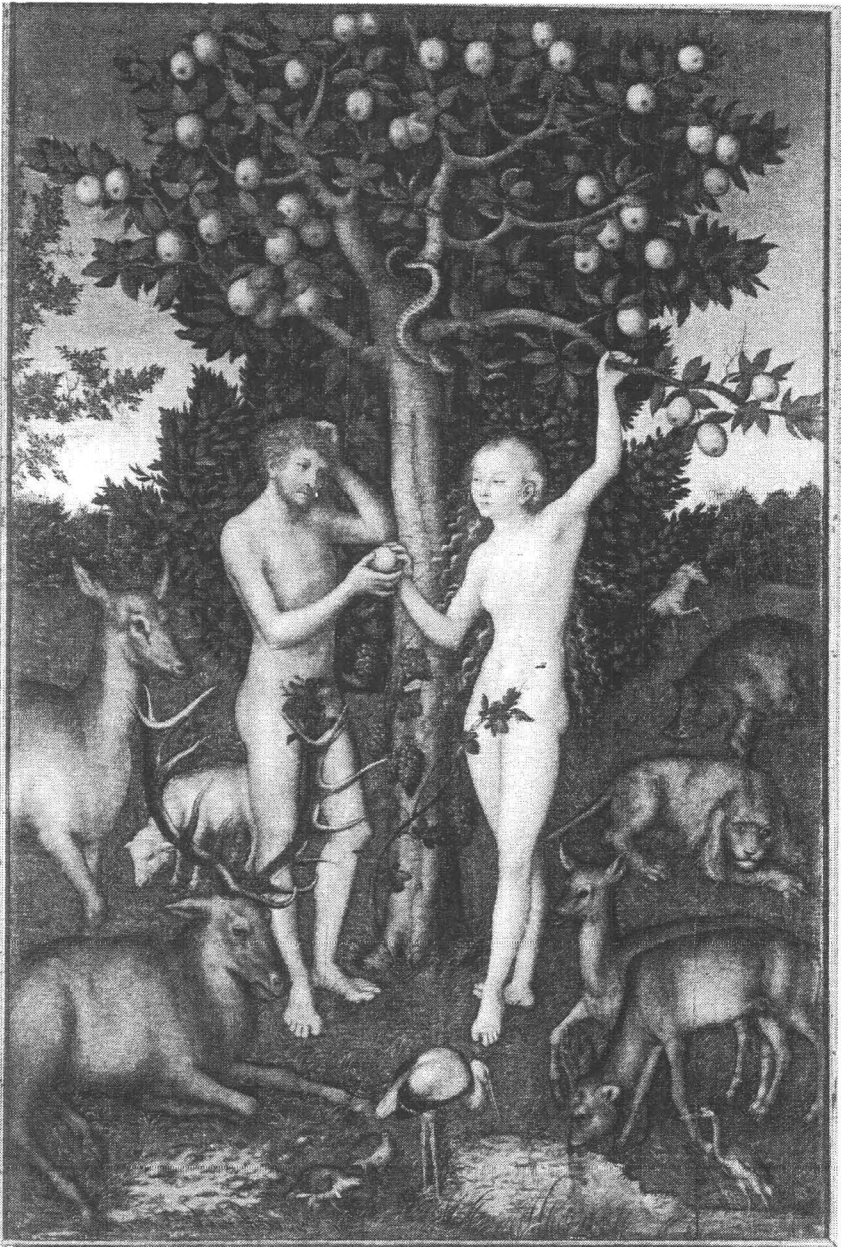
When they have sex—and Milton makes it his business to assure us that they do⁶—Adam and Eve don't have to bother to get undressed; they are "eased," says Milton's narrator, "the putting off / These troublesome disguises which we wear" (4.739–40). The striptease would be completely impossible in paradise, or (in language more congenial to Milton's assumptions about sex) it would be completely unnecessary: sex between Adam and Eve is already perfect, and it couldn't be improved by inflecting it with the anxieties, prohibitions, distortions, and artifice of the fallen world.

For Adam and Eve as sexual partners, nakedness turns out to be not only natural but downright convenient; perhaps more surprising, it's no disadvantage for them when they're entertaining.

⁴ For comment on the gendering of experience in these descriptions, see William Shullenberger, "Wrestling with the Angel: Paradise Lost and Feminist Criticism," *Milton Quarterly* 20 (1986): 75–78; Catherine Belsey, *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 64–66; Anne Ferry, "Milton's Creation of Eve," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 28 (1988): 116–17; and Elspeth Graham, "'Vain Desire,' 'Perverseness' and 'Love's Proper Hue': Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Interest in *Paradise Lost*," *Critical Survey* 4 (1992): 133–34.

⁵ On this point, see Roland Mushat Frye, *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts: Iconographic Tradition in the Epic Poems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978), who discusses at some length the "strategies of concealment" adopted by visual artists in their depictions of Adam and Eve, and draws the inference that "Milton's repudiation of this conception could not have been more complete, or more explicit" (266).

⁶ For detailed commentary on Milton's commitment to the view that Adam and Eve were sexual partners before the fall, see James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh: Paradisaical Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 232–87.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*, 1526.
Courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

The moment Adam notices the approach of Raphael he puts Eve in charge of making lunch and goes out himself to meet the angel:

without more train
Accompanied than with his own complete
Perfections, in himself was all his state. (5.351–53)

The primary sense here is that Adam proceeds alone, without equipage or entourage, but by now we have seen enough of Adam's "complete / Perfections" to ensure that only a hint is needed to remind us that, as he walks out to meet Raphael, Adam is (naturally, unproblematically) naked. When Eve's turn comes to meet the angel we get more than a hint: she is "Undecked, save with herself" (5.380); she is lovelier than the three "naked" (5.382) goddesses in the judgement of Paris story; but she needs "no veil" (5.384) because innocence has nothing to hide. Adam and Raphael sit down to enjoy a splendid vegetarian lunch followed by copious, leisurely conversation (2,679 lines of it, to be precise). Under these circumstances Eve does exactly what Milton expects the perfect wife to do:

Meanwhile at table Eve
Ministered naked, and their flowing cups
With pleasant liquors crowned. (5.443–45)

The narrator acknowledges at once that what he's just described is a very sexy scene; he alludes to the story in Genesis in which the "sons of God" are sexually enraptured by the "daughters of men" (Genesis 6:2); he implies that on this occasion it would have been understandable had Raphael fallen in love with Eve. But of course no such thing happens because paradise is paradise: there's no jealousy here, the narrator assures us, because there can be no infidelity. So Eve's nakedness is again returned to the realm of the unproblematic, though only after a number of potential problems have been posited if only to be disposed of.

My point is that Milton goes to great lengths to distinguish between life in the seventeenth century and life in paradise; between the civilized need for clothing on the one hand, the escape into nakedness on the other. But there's one interesting respect in which Milton does not liberate Adam and Eve from the conventions of civilized life, and that is their need for privacy.

When they retire for the night, Adam and Eve enter an enclosure most often identified as their “bower,” and referred to when first introduced as “their blissful bower” (4.690). This is a structure created, like everything else in paradise, by God, and specifically “Chos’n” by him for “man’s delightful use” (4.691–92). Its principal characteristics are designed so as to ensure comfort, pleasure, and above all seclusion. Its roof is the “thickest covert” of interwoven “Laurel and myrtle” (4.693–94). Its walls are made of shrubs “Fenced up” (4.697) so as to prevent intrusion. The floor of the bower is a “Mosaic” (4.700) of beautiful and odoriferous flowers. Such careful attention to the borders surrounding and containing the *locus amoenus* is completely absent from Milton’s prototype, the “Bower of Bliss” (2.12.69.4) in *The Faerie Queene*. The approach to Spenser’s bower is made through an enticing labyrinth of “covert groves and thickets close” (2.12.76.6), but there is no definite boundary and hence no sense of seclusion.

The centrepiece of Milton’s bower is the “nuptial bed” (4.710) decorated by Eve “With flowers, garlands, and sweet-smelling herbs” (4.709). When Adam and Eve enter the bower they are entitled to the pleasures of intimacy, indeed they are guaranteed the pleasures of intimacy by the exclusion of other forms of curious life:

other creature here

Beast, bird, insect, or worm durst enter none;
Such was their awe of man. (4.703–705)

The question that arises from this arrangement is the obvious one: why? Why is it that Milton, after going to such lengths to insist on the innocence of prelapsarian sexuality, after exhibiting the human couple in their resplendent nakedness, now goes to the trouble of guaranteeing their privacy, of sheltering them even from the curious eyes of insects and of worms?

The short answer to this question might be that privacy is simply an inherent human good for Milton, and that he is therefore obliged to include it in paradise, where all things beneficial to humankind will of necessity be represented. Privacy would then occupy a place in the social setup of paradise roughly parallel to that of modesty in its moral setup. There is of course no shame in paradise, because nothing to be ashamed about. But is there modesty? When Adam tells the story of the creation of Eve, he points out that when she’s first presented to him, Eve turns away and

retreats from him because she sets a high value on her “virgin modesty” (8.501),

That would be wooed, and not unsought be won,
Not obvious, not obtrusive, but retired,
The more desirable (8.503–05)

We might imagine Milton’s construction of Eve’s modesty to run roughly parallel to St. Anselm’s argument for the existence of God. Think of a female being infinitely desirable in every respect, the being (as God says to Adam) “exactly to thy heart’s desire” (8.451). Now think of another being who includes within herself all of the attributes of the former, *plus* modesty. Which of these two women is the more desirable? The second, of course, and therefore she must be Eve. Modesty only makes her all the more desirable by enhancing the value of her other attributes. Of course Adam quickly overcomes Eve’s reticence, because she is also given the virute of submission. “To the nuptial bow’r,” says Adam, “I led her blushing like the morn” (8.510–11). To those austere puritans who object that there ought to be no blushing in paradise, Milton would have a ready answer: blushing is an act which enhances the beauty of woman and enriches the pleasure of sexual conversation. Since these are good because ordained by God, blushing must be good too, and therefore part of paradise.

Milton doesn’t use the word “privacy” in *Paradise Lost*, but he establishes the concept most clearly in his creation of the bower, and he alludes to it by means of a variety of synonyms. The bower itself is described as a “sacred and sequestered” (4.706) place: sacred in the sense that it is the locus of the “rites / Mysterious of connubial love” (4.742–43) and sequestered in the sense that all beings other than Adam and Eve are denied entrance. When God looks down on his newly created human pair he sees them enfolded in “Uninterrupted joy, unrivaled love / In blissful solitude” (3.68–69). Clearly this is the shared solitude of being alone together, a paradoxical state of unity in doubleness which is inflected though not fundamentally altered by the rest of the poem. In the final lines Adam and Eve must leave the enclosure of paradise forever, and with it the enclosure within the enclosure represented by the bower; but as they take “their solitary way” into the future they are still walking “hand in hand” (12.648–49). They have become public figures in the great story of the fall, but their relation-

ship to one another still includes the notion of a shared privacy that can be observed from the outside but not really penetrated from within.

Among the most interesting of Milton's synonyms for privacy is the idea of the "close recess." In this phrase "close" retains its early modern connotation of secrecy,⁷ and its kinship with the closet, a room designed to harbour and protect the intimate treasures of aristocratic and upwardly mobile middle-class men and women.⁸ "Recess" has both its modern sense of a spatial indentation, and its earlier meaning of withdrawal from public activity into private retirement. When Milton's narrator takes us inside the bower for the first time he tells us that we are entering a secret place: "Here in close recess," he says, as if to warn us that we should respect the intimacy of the scene, "Espousèd Eve decked first her nuptial bed" (4.708–10). Secrecy is here given a completely honourable coloration, as I have already implied, because it inhabits the very centre of the structure of paradise. So it is oddly disconcerting to find the very same phrase used in connection with Satan's political activities. Part of Satan's appeal in the early books of *Paradise Lost* is his charisma as a great public leader; he gathers the rebel angels at will and dominates them with his rhetoric. But then, after reducing his numerous followers to miniature size, Satan withdraws for consultation: "far within, / And in their own dimensions," the principal demons gather "In close recess and secret conclave" (1.792–95). There can be no doubt that this is the kind of event that has given the phrase "private and confidential" such a bad reputation; the secrecy of inner-cabinet consultation is here a ruse to disguise political manipulation. Much later the two morally opposite meanings of the "recess" are conflated. After Eve leaves Adam's side to do her own gardening, she is discovered by Satan tending a little plot of flowerbeds:

Such pleasure took the Serpent to behold
This flow'ry plat, the sweet recess of Eve
Thus early, thus alone (9.455–57)

⁷ See Hotspur's description of Kate as "for secrecy / No lady closer" (*1 Henry IV* 2.3.110–11).

⁸ See Georgiana Ziegler, "'My Lady's Chamber': Female Space, Female Chastity in Shakespeare," *Textual Practice* 4 (1990): 73–77, and Alan Stewart, "The Early Modern Closet Discovered," *Representations* 50 (Spring 1995): 76–87.

Here “close recess” has become “sweet recess”; the privacy of Eve is no longer protected by the sacred enclosure; and unprotected privacy is subject to invasion.

Although the word “privacy” is absent from *Paradise Lost*, the adjectival form “private” does occur, but only once. The occasion is Adam’s interpretation of Eve’s disturbing dream in Book 5. He begins with a few remarks about the construction of the soul, its division into many faculties, their subordination to reason, and the important work of fancy in forming images out of the material supplied by the senses. But at night, Adam says, fancy “retires / Into her private cell when nature rests” (5.108–109). That’s why “mimic fancy” (5.110) has her chance, during sleep, to create the misshapen material of dreams. Here the idea of privacy is quite strikingly connected to a sense of interiority—of an inner space within the self in which momentous decisions can be made.⁹ The sense of interiority has been achieved in part by a system of concentric layering. Paradise itself is surrounded by a “verdurous wall” (4.143) from the top of which Adam can view the surrounding plain of Eden. Within paradise is the bower, protected again with walls and now roofed-in as well. When Adam and Eve retire for the night they enter “their inmost bow’r” (4.738), presumably the location of the much decorated nuptial bed. On the morning of Eve’s dream Adam is afraid that, while they were asleep, some aspect of evil has approached them, though of course he cannot yet have knowledge of evil. “Yet evil whence?” he says to Eve; “in thee can harbor none, / Created pure” (5.99–100). What does harbour inside Eve is the soul, still pure because Eve has not assented to whatever suggestions of evil may have invaded her sleep. And “in the soul” (5.100), Adam explains, are the various faculties: reason, fancy, mimic fancy, and so on. Even deeper within the soul, very near the centre of this vast concentric system, it would appear, is the “private cell” to which fancy withdraws during sleep. Interiority is represented here as the centre of consciousness itself. Milton’s metaphysics is indeed a metaphysics of presence; privacy is among the devices he uses to fill and replenish the self.

⁹ For a discussion of the relationship between privacy and interiority, see Ronald Huebert, “Privacy: The Early Social History of a Word,” *The Sewanee Review* 105 (1997): 33–35.

Like Eve, Adam has an internal “cell” to which fancy retreats while dormant. You would expect this to happen while God is creating Eve out of Adam’s rib, because God takes the precaution of giving Adam a supernatural anaesthetic before he performs the operation. But, surprisingly, Adam’s fancy remains active during this procedure:

Mine eyes he closed, but open left the cell
Of fancy my internal sight. (8.460–61)

This is handy, in terms of narrative technique, because it allows Adam to recall exactly all of the steps in the formation of his helpmeet. But there is a further sense in which this account of Adam’s interior subjectivity is especially moving. Notice that in Adam’s case the cell of fancy is equated with “internal sight.” At first glance this notion simply runs directly parallel to the image-making property assigned to fancy in the interpretation of Eve’s dream. But the phrase “internal sight” must have held peculiar resonance for a poet who had been blind for some twenty years by the time he began the composition of *Paradise Lost*. If privacy is understood as interiority, then there is a biographical reason why it would be especially meaningful to Milton. As in the case of Adam, God had closed Milton’s eyes too, but left intact the “internal sight” by which he could create his poem.

Privacy in all of its forms—spatial, sexual, and psychological—is available to both Adam and Eve, but it does not follow that privacy in paradise is a gender-neutral term. In fact Eve is associated far more closely with the values of privacy than her husband. So much could already be inferred from the description of the bower as a “close recess” and its linkage to the “sweet recess of Eve,” or from the division of responsibilities implied in the lines which describe Eve decorating “*her* nuptial bed” (my emphasis). Adam is given various public functions that Eve would rather avoid. When Raphael arrives, Adam greets him at the threshold of the bower while Eve is busy “within” (5.303), preparing lunch. This pattern remains constant after the fall, when Michael pays a visit to instruct the fallen pair on their new relationship to God’s will. Adam senses that their new guest will expect compliance to a gendered code of behaviour: “whom not to offend,” he explains to Eve, “With reverence I must meet, and thou retire” (11.236–37). On learning that they will have to leave paradise, Adam laments the

prospect of “Departure from this happy place, our sweet / Recess” (11.303–04). Eve’s concerns are far more specifically motivated by attachment to the plants she has tended and to the “nuptial bower, by me adorned” (11.280). In giving Adam the public voice of the first family and Eve the responsibility for domestic arrangements Milton is of course doing nothing surprising for his time and place. Morally speaking, the gendering of privacy may be unfair to Eve: the balance is tilted so that her interiority is receptive to Satan’s dream, so that her inwardness is analogous to Satan’s secrecy, so that her decision to venture out alone leaves her unprepared and vulnerable to temptation. But in artistic terms it is Eve who gains from this unfair division: it is she who dreams and sallies forth and makes the fatal error of trusting her own inner resources when she ought to have simply obeyed. When Michael tells Adam that his loss will be replaced by “A paradise within thee, happier far” (12.587), the announcement is in one sense an endorsement of privacy and of Eve’s part in nurturing the private self.

I return now to the question which has brought these reflections into being: why does Milton ensure that Adam and Eve will have privacy, even in paradise? The long answer to this question is implicit in all of the separate observations I’ve made so far. For Milton, the perfect state of being has to include perfect sexual interaction. That’s why, even if he’s risking inconsistency, he gives Eve the characteristics (such as modest reluctance) which he finds sexually attractive. That’s also why privacy has to be established and maintained, even in paradise. Without privacy, human sexuality would be less than perfect: it would be subject to voyeurism, at very least, and therefore tarnished by association. This kind of devaluation is on the verge of happening when Satan observes the conjugal attraction of our first parents and turns aside with envy. But Milton rescues his human pair by giving them a blissful bower in which their sexual desires are in every way pleasing, both to themselves and to God. Paradise without sex? For Milton that would have been unthinkable. Sex without privacy? That would have been unbearable. So paradise is designed to ensure that Adam and Eve will have plenty of both.

But Milton was also a child of the English Reformation, and it is in his deep religious allegiances that we can find the reasons for the persistence of privacy during and beyond the fall. Jürgen Habermas has historicized the value of privacy in the early modern period in ways that Milton might have found congenial: “The status

of the Church changed as a result of the Reformation; the anchoring in divine authority that it represented—that is, religion—became a private matter. The so-called freedom of religion historically secured the first sphere of private autonomy.”¹⁰ In *Paradise Lost*, and indeed in much of his thinking and writing over many years, Milton was taking an active part in the great historical change which Habermas here describes. Why was Milton, obviously a deeply religious man, so unwilling to associate himself with any established church? Because he valued the exercise of private devotions far more than public forms of worship. Why did Milton, a vigorous campaigner on behalf of Parliament, insist on attacking the policies of his own party in the *Areopagitica*? Because he valued the freedom of a private conscience above any public agenda. So also in his great epic poem, with all of its public conventions and aspirations, Milton endorsed what Habermas describes as the “sphere of private autonomy.” The greatest act of Eve and Adam is to choose. The autonomy of this action is theologically guaranteed by the doctrine of free will, and it is artistically secured in the creation of the private self.

¹⁰ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) 11.