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"Not to Irksome Toil, but to Delight He Made Us": Work and Leisure as Gift
in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

This paper offers a close reading of *Paradise Lost* IX.235-243 and explores the implications of this and related passages regarding work, leisure, and gift. As scholar Laura Knoppers explains, in Eden Adam and Eve enjoy an order of life designed for their maturity, which will eventually enable them to draw nearer to God. Leisure is integral to this order, operating as a defining and overarching mode for living, and work operates as an aspect of leisure and an arena for growing maturity and relational delight. As such, their life functions as a gift. But before transgressing God's command, Eve reveals in conversation with Adam that the two of them can – or even must – secure their lives and safety through their work. She also articulates that their rest must be "merited" through work, and that overcoming temptation might gain them honor. Both of these ideas indicate that even before the serpent's temptation Eve believes that work functions as a method for security, which humans may gain for themselves. Such ideas violate the economy of gift by which Creation operates, especially as demonstrated in the nature of the relationship between God and human beings. It is the givenness of creation which makes Eve's prioritization of efficiency unproductive and a critical step toward disobedience.

Keywords: Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Gift, Leisure, Maturity, Rest, Work

Introduction

In the book of Genesis, the impetus for humanity's fall is a serpent's deception and the willingness of human beings to trespass God's commands when prompted to doubt God's prohibition and goodness. In *Paradise Lost*, English poet John Milton attempts to consider why Eve might have been vulnerable to the serpent's guile. To do so, Milton introduces the concept of efficiency, the quality of accomplishing something with the least possible waste of time, effort, distraction, or extraneous elements for productivity or greater gain. When Eve suggests she and Adam separate, she appeals to their need to work efficiently in order to fulfill their duties. To Adam, separation would deprive them of the enjoyment of shared work and would make them more vulnerable to their enemy's wiles or even an attack on their marital harmony and delight.

Since God has given Adam and Eve the task of tending Eden, but the garden's productivity far outpaces their efforts to tame it (IV.436-38, 618-19; IX.205-212), Milton's choice to vilify efficiency seems odd. Why would valuing productivity in one's God-given role not be a wise way to fulfill one's stewardship responsibilities?

Considering the issue more deeply, it appears that when Eve prioritizes efficiency for the sake of productivity, she ignores what prelapsarian work represents. Work is an aspect of leisure and a mode for maturity and relational delight. Underlying her lapse is a desire for security and self-promoted salvation, since efficiency's value lies in its capacity to expand productivity and therefore security, rather than valuing relational maturity for the sake of greater mutual delight. It is this impetus, evident throughout the process of her fall, which is so dangerous, despite being hidden behind an appeal to efficiency.

An Ordered Life

The universe of *Paradise Lost* exists as a structure of hierarchy and bounded growth.¹ God the Father is the omnipotent and all-good Ruler "from whom / All things proceed" (V.469-470). According to Milton's monism, God crafts things from different combinations of materiality and spirituality, so that these exist not in opposition but along the same continuum. The more spiritual and intellectual an entity is, the closer to God it is, while the more material it is, the further away from God it is. While each kind of creation has certain bounds, there can be an upward movement of each thing or the matter within it. Humans, created eventually to be with God in the union of Heaven and Earth, will or at least might eventually "turn all to spirit" and become as the angels are.² That is, while Adam and Eve would not become angelic beings, they would come to enjoy the privileges of the angels, if they remained obedient. As Hugh MacCallum describes, "[t]ime will bring change. ... if they [Adam and Eve] are obedient they will grow more and more spiritual, ascending to heaven by merit, while if they disobey the prohibition they will fall towards death and non-being" (MacCallum 112, PL V.470-505). By merit, MacCallum does not mean earning security or the pleasantness of their present life, but rather that through being "obedient, and retain[ing] / Unalterably firm [the Father's] love entire" they would be able to draw nearer to God than they could in their initial created state (PL V.501-502). However, growth is bounded; there are certain barriers of nature that cannot be superseded. A beast cannot become a human being, a human being cannot become an angel, and an angel cannot become God.

Life in the Garden of Eden also contains an order of life. Milton describes how Adam and Eve rise, worship, work, and rest together at particular times each day, their lives expressing a union between action and contemplation (PL IV.610-15, 618-19, 623-33; V.3-7, 9, 144-208, 211,

232-33, 300-2, cf. 369-70; IX.230-31; Martin, 232). Scholar Laura Knoppers agrees that Eden is arranged to help Adam and Eve become internally virtuous and able to exercise self-control. She postulates that the emphasis which Milton places on the ordered nature of Adam and Eve's existence reflects aspects of early modern Puritan households and houses of correction, which were designed to form people into productive and virtuous citizens (Knoppers 545-46, 548, 551-553, for this paragraph). Houses of correction were somewhat like prisons but exhibited highly programmed (and rigorous) schedules of work, meals, and prayer, as well as specific punishments, and were created to reeducate paupers and vagabonds and make them economically valuable (or at least not economically harmful). Households too possessed a structure of authority, with "the Protestant household ruled by husbandly wisdom and love and characterized by companionship, consent, and voluntary wifely submission" (548). A properly structured household included particularized, supervised labor for the sake of personal edification and a system of rewards and punishments for its inhabitants. Likewise, Adam and Eve are given particular labor (tending the garden), God oversees their work (and their lives), and their work is "continual and closely monitored" and is bounded by Eden's walls (551-553). Adam and Eve also face a prohibition and the threat of punishment if they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their work is for their own growth and benefit, having no product other than Adam and Eve's own betterment and maturity, a "loving obedience, a subjectivity which complements and ultimately replaces the external apparatuses of discipline" (551, 553).

Knoppers' thesis explains that Milton could have had in mind both kinds of "houses" when crafting the order of life in Eden. As Adam and Eve's home and work environment, Eden and its structure parallels the home as a "house of correction" to instill obedience and maturity.

In Puritan thought regarding rightly ordered households, part of what brings people (particularly women) into a more obedient state is kindness, love, and patience. These characteristics are evident in prelapsarian Eden, for Adam, Eve, and God are always kind, loving, and patient.

An Arrangement of Mutual Delight

Another element of Eden which reflects the Puritan household and offers a contrast to the rigidness within houses of correction (and perhaps households as well) is the leisure embedded within their structure of living. Adam and Eve are to enjoy themselves, and each other's company, amidst their life. In talking with Eve, Adam remarks: "not to irksome toil, but to delight / [God] made us, and delight to reason joined" (IX.242-243). Elaborating, Adam explains:

... not so strictly hath our Lord imposed
 Labor, as to debar us when we need
 Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,
 Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
 Of looks and smiles, for smiles from reason flow,
 To brute denied, and are of love the food,
 Love not the lowest end of human life.
 For not to irksome toil, but to delight
 He made us, and delight to Reason joined. (IX.235-43)

In saying this, Adam indicates that God did not create a system in which work and refreshment are at odds. Instead, Adam and Eve may partake of bodily and intellectual food whenever they

feel the need for it. Their existence is marked not only by diligence but by a necessity for leisure – unnecessary phrases, romantic allusions, and courtesy – to nourish love (IX.235-42). Adam and Eve are created for delight, the kind of delight that derives from reason; that is, they are created for love. Thus, this “delightful” arrangement of life allows Adam and Eve to enjoy their lives and to mature in love and relationship.

As previously noted by Knoppers, the garden is for *their* growth, and delight itself is integral to their purpose. In the words of Hugh MacCallum, the garden “offers a subject for the art of man, the same art that will eventually create a much larger culture” (112). This art is not for the sake of efficiency, and human activity is not pursued through restraint of leisure, through “be[ing] lopped, propped, and pruned” (112). Instead, they live in a way conducive to growth, through “fresh and demanding contexts provided by the expanding pattern of relations” and the “new opportunities for conversation and learning” (111-112). The gift of work and leisure offers the setting for cultivating practices that lead to delight. Pleasure is not ancillary, nor is it a byproduct of work. Rather, leisure is the reason for work – not in the sense of working so that one is able to rest from work because one’s needs have been satisfied, but rather that work is one of the contexts for relational happiness.

Both Adam and Eve agree that Eden’s verdant growth expands despite their daily pruning and gardening. As evening draws nigh, Adam comments that their work remains unfinished, even though they must rest at night. He describes how the “arbors” and “alleys” of their walking paths are plagued with overgrown branches, and flower blossoms and tree gum cover their path, making it “unsightly and unsmooth” (IV.626-631). Both require removal through human care (IV.629-630). When Eve suggests separating to work without distraction, she seems to be echoing Adam’s observations from two days before. She notes that Eden’s vast expanse is too

great for her and Adam to handle, and that the garden's verdant bounty and growth outpaces their efforts to tame it (IX.201-3, 209-12). Eve likewise is concerned that if the growth overtook their walking paths, it would restrict their freedom of movement.

Scholar Christopher Wortham has noticed that Milton portrays Eden itself through language indicating an "idealized landscape ... [that] has much in common with the country house of English poetry" (145). Milton's descriptions of Adam and Eve's "seat, "bower," and "lodge" evoke the works of nature and architecture found in the English country seats of the landed gentry of early modern England (Wortham 141-146). At first, Wortham's postulate seems to contradict Eve's concerns. But if, as scholars such as Eric Song suggest, Milton in *Paradise Lost* interacts with the colonialism of his time, Eve's word choices and fear of wilderness may intentionally hearken to the descriptions of jungles or the wilderness of the uncultivated new world, a place where (at least for colonists) it can be difficult to live comfortably. Her speech would then allude to fear of wilderness and barbarism encroaching and overtaking civilization, of a wild and alien danger requiring their own efforts for protection.

For Eve, separation is the answer to this problem because, when she and Adam work in close proximity, they distract each other through looks, smiles, and conversation about their garden discoveries (IX.220-223). In so doing, they fail to "earn their supper," that is, to merit respite for their work (IX. 223-25). However, as Adam notes in his response, this idea of "earning respite" and great productivity are not in God's design for their work or life in the garden in general. He dismisses Eve's worries that the garden will overtake them by saying

Doubt not but our joint hands

Will keep from wilderness with ease, as wide

As we need walk, till younger hands ere long

Assist us (IX.244-7)

Underlying Adam's reassurance that efficiency at the expense of relational delights is unnecessary is a sense of trust in God's structure of the garden. In doing so, he draws upon the idea from his and Eve's evening hymn, that

Thou also mad'st the Night,
 Maker omnipotent, and thou the day,
 Which we in our appointed work employed
 Have finished happy in our mutual help
 And mutual love, the crown of all our bliss
 Ordained by thee, and this delicious place
 For us too large, where thy abundance wants
 Partakers, and uncropped falls to the ground.
 But thou hast promised from us two a Race
 To fill the Earth, who shall with us extoll
 Thy goodness infinite, both when we wake,
 And when we seek, as now, thy gift of sleep. (PL IV.724-735)

Here, Adam and Eve declare that God has appointed work for them, and they finish it happy "in [their] mutual help and mutual love" (PL IV.618-619, 726-728). The passage's placement within Adam and Eve's nightly hymn and the narrator's later commentary indicate that Milton wants readers to connect work, pleasure, and trust with mutuality and loving relations. The close repetition emphasizes that help and love is *mutual*; Adam and Eve are working together and helping each other. This mutuality is the highest "bliss" which God has

ordained for them (PL IV.728-729). It is not their sexual love but their mutual aid and delight in one another, including their completed day's work (PL IV.726-727, 741-742).³

Furthermore, the two call upon God's promise that more human beings will rise from their union. They pray in remembrance that they have been commanded to "increase" through "connubial love" (PL IV.732, 748). Shortly after praying for increase, they act in accord with the command to increase, both in prayer and sexual relations. Through God's blessing and their love for one another, children will arrive, as God has promised to them. This is why Adam tells Eve they ought not "doubt" God's promise but believe that they can keep the Garden lovely for their life until they have more helpers. They can trust that more people, "younger hands" will be conceived through their *mutual*, united love. In the meantime, Adam and Eve can trust that the order of their life in the garden based in leisure will be enough; they need not worry if they cannot tend all of Eden.

In their morning conversation, Adam also responds to Eve's belief that their interaction distracts them from their work by focusing on delight as their core purpose. He describes love as "not the lowest end of human life" and that God made them for "delight," which is joined to reason (IX.235-43). Moreover, Adam describes the "food" of love – conversation, looks, smiles – as the acts of human beings, not "brutes" (IX.238-240). Delight is thus an especially relational love, a delight in another's presence and in sharing knowledge and insight with other human beings. Such behaviors elicit a sensation of delight, which is then expressed by looks and smiles. Since these arise from reason, and reason is a particularly human endeavor, such pleasure must be uniquely human.³ The sensation of delight is not the same as that enjoyed by animals, from whom Adam could not find a true mate (VIII.579-606), but rather operates in right relation to the emotions and the senses which elicit them. These are integral to Adam and Eve's purpose, for the

shared, relationally-based sensation of pleasure or happiness that arises between reasoning creatures is critical to human purpose.

Underlying Adam's reassurance that efficiency at the expense of relational delights is unnecessary is a sense of trust in God's order of life for them. Whatever is truly needful for them to do, they can accomplish. Hugh MacCallum's analysis substantiates this, for he notes that the garden, and Adam and Eve's work in it, is not integral to their happiness. Instead, the garden "offers a subject for the art of man, the same art that will eventually create a much larger culture" (MacCallum 112). This art is not for the sake of efficiency, and human activity is not pursued through restraint of leisure, through "be[ing] lopped, propped, and pruned" (MacCallum 112). Instead, life is lived in a way conducive to growth, through "fresh and demanding contexts provided by the expanding pattern of relations" and the "new opportunities for conversation and learning" (MacCallum 111-112).

An Economy of Gift

Significantly, these attributes indicate that the leisure embedded within work, or the work which is intertwined with leisure, is a gift. True nourishment does not come through relentless toil, or honor through human strength of will. Instead, work and leisure are a gift from God to human beings. Characterizing this relationship as one of "gift" is appropriate, for the relationship is not reciprocal or transactional. Indeed, any relationship between God and human beings is not (indeed, cannot) be reciprocal, due to the inherent difference in natures of the two subjects and that God is the Source of all things, including human capacity.

Moreover, gifts are to be used, enjoyed, and perhaps stewarded, and one must receive a gift in order for it to function as a gift (to the recipient, not to the giver). But a gift is not earned or secured by the one to whom it is given, but instead is received. While one returns an ill-fitting

gift or destroys a dangerous gift, when the gift is appropriate (as it is by nature in Eden), it is used and enjoyed for its purpose.

Just as a gift, to be a gift, must be given and received willingly, so too does the language of "gift" capture the importance of will within Milton's thinking. Human beings are left free to respond to God both before and after the Fall because, as the poem's narrator (Milton?) explains, free will is necessary for demonstrating obedience and loyalty, both of which are expressions of "faith and love" (III.102-111). Milton's God explains that though people respond only by His grace (gift), all are given some sense of God through their conscience, and those who follow this and seek to do what is right will be saved (III.170-195). This free gift and free response further indicate the gift economy at work in *Paradise Lost*.

The relation of work and leisure also serves as a crucial symbol for the relationship between God and human beings in *Paradise Lost*. This is because the schema underlying work and leisure is one of "givenness," in contrast to work and independent merit. God gives them not only themselves but their whole world, and God bestows upon them the structures and practices for receiving and enjoying this gift of an ordered life of work and rest. These allow human beings to be in relationship to God by offering gifts in return. That is, while God has given them life, breath, and all their capacities, they willingly respond with praise, thanks, and obedience, including consistently working in the day.⁴ Their work serves as a forum for their growth in love, whether in personal development, maturity, or relational delight.

An Unproductive Mistake

The idea of a gift economy highlights the transgressive nature of eating forbidden fruit. Gift economies assume the freedom (or positive willingness) to give and operate through trust

that one will receive gifts in return. Trust is especially important when one party is the source of all the gifts and the other party is dependent, though with the capacity for choice and response. For example, a parent might give her son an allowance, and the son purchases something for her anniversary or a birthday out of his love for his mother. Or perhaps a father supplies his budding artist paper and crayons and paints, and the daughter in joy paints a picture and gives it to her father. The dependent party's trust in a loving response and ongoing provision is necessary for the gift economy to operate, and participation is necessary for there to be a sense of mutuality, despite the impossibility of real reciprocity.

Eve's language of "earning" and her fear that she and Adam need to secure their joy in the Garden offer a critical juxtaposition to this concept of gift. By appealing to efficiency, Eve demonstrates that she does not understand the nature and purpose of work is delightful maturity, not efficient productivity. Indeed, only by accepting and participating in the order of the Garden – conceived as a gift – is human growth possible. Thus, while Eve remains unaware of the process contributing to the fall, her erroneous belief that she must work enough to "merit" supper and guard her and Adam from the Garden's wildness contributes to her vulnerability to temptation, for she is already moving toward life outside of God's order for her maturity and exaltation. Without realizing it, Eve has begun to distrust that participating in God's gift is enough for their care, or that God will care for them if they remain obedient to the Garden's order. Therefore, she rejects the structure of Paradise that cultivates maturity and delight.

In choosing to depart, Eve sacrifices greater assurance against temptation and closer relationship to Adam for efficiency and risking her connection with God. Evident in this choice is Eve's misunderstanding of her purpose and position.⁵ Eve fears that the garden will run wild; therefore she and Adam must be productive before they can rest. In failing to reason through

Adam's discussion of their proper place and the trustworthiness of the design of God's creation, she rejects the idea that the order in which they have been living is enough to protect them. She seeks to reach beyond caretaking based in delight that is itself rooted in reason, and instead defines life by what she can get done, demonstrating her mistaken understanding of the nature and order of Eden.

Further, Eve not only reveals a deficient understanding of the role that work ought to play in her and Adam's life together, but she also exhibits a propensity to believe she can do more on her own than she actually can. Fear over their well-being and a lack of proper concern for guarding against temptation seem to provoke Eve to pursue self-guarded security through efficiency-oriented habits of work that separate them from each other. Beneath both is a beginning mistrust of God's order of the garden that encourages their growth. This order necessitates not only explicit obedience in foregoing the fruit but also through remaining together for mutual delight, aiding each other and (eventually) begetting children. This requires trusting God's goodness and wisdom. While one's reason may not fully comprehend this order explicitly, it is enough to recognize that they are made for delight, not efficiency or productivity. This reflects that Eden in *Paradise Lost* can be characterized as an economy of gift, for God gives all things and human beings freely return these gifts out of love for God.

These observations further suggest that participating in leisure for relationship can provide a "brightline" for one's attitude toward God, while trespassing the boundaries of leisure signify a potential impending violation of one's proper relation to God and to His creation, including toward other human beings and even the rest of the material order. Valuing and practicing leisure thus provide a concrete practice to help counteract these tendencies. This is

because for Milton, only by demonstrating the trust underlying the gift economy can one experience true delight.

Notes

1. This, and the rest of the ideas regarding hierarchy, are from Matthew Smith, "The World Turned Upside Down: Satan in Paradise Lost" (lecture, Azusa Pacific University Honors College, Azusa, CA), February 13, 2017; Matthew Smith, HON 280: Core III class discussion, Azusa Pacific University Honors College, Azusa, CA, February 14, 2017.
2. Milton posited that all creation proceeds from God rather than out of nothing. God creates everything out of an original matter, which in Milton's heterodox theology seems to be from God's own substance (Lehnhof 15; Watt 35-36, citing Milton's *de Doctrina Christiana* in Yale 6:322). Therefore, all matter "is alive with spirit ... [and] the spiritual and material, are not discontinuous" (Edwards 503). Matter may "return to spirit" through obedience (Edwards 504), seemingly obedience to one's nature, given that plants also move from greater materiality to greater spirituality (PL V.479-482). Gabriel offers readers an explanation of Milton's monistic creationism when conversing with Adam (PL V.469-490).
3. This might connect to Milton's conjecture in his tract, "Doctrine and Divorce" section 1, that when St. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians advises men that it is better to marry than "to burn" with passion," St. Paul meant "rational burning," a desire for conversation, not physical lust. This contrasts to the base sexuality of intercourse which animals share with human beings, against which the archangel Gabriel cautions Adam and instead encourages the man to commit himself to the especially rational delight which Eve offers (VIII.579-606).
4. Indeed, Adam scarcely understands what it would mean for someone to disobey God, and Eve assumes that she could not succumb to the wiles of another (PL V.512-518, IX.335-341).
5. Scholars such as Sandra Gilbert have noticed that Milton characterizes Eve as less rational than Adam and more oriented toward her senses, requiring male guidance and receiving

wisdom intermediated through Adam (Sandra Gilbert, “Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” 2018; Sandra Gilbert, “Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers” May 1978; see PL IV.295-299, 478-491, 498-501, 634-638; V.48-57; VIII.538-546, 560-594, among others). Because she is created to complete Adam rather than only for God, an early Milton discussion partner of mine queried whether Eve might lack the character, strength, and/or education to resist temptation, or that perhaps an underlying sense of inferiority contributed to Eve’s vulnerability to the serpent’s tempting. But while Milton might understand the temptation as a gendered event and Eve’s behavior demonstrating an especially female weakness, the contemporary reader can extricate fundamental arguments about human design without gendered implications (or even primarily within a marital framework). It is also intriguing to note that productivity and efficiency are competitive and “breadwinning” virtues, commonly conceived as male, which may be a sign that even for Milton Eve is not *only* representing women but also a disordered propensity towards self-security. Regardless, the propensity to pursue security, merit, and honor through efficient and productive labor instead of prioritizing leisure and relationships is not gender-specific but relevant to all.

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