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What to Sight and Smell Was Sweet: Flowers and Gardening in Paradise Lost

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Flowers and gardening have been part of human life since God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, flowers and the act of gardening enhance the meaning of the poem and give insight into life before and after sin corrupted God's creation. Milton's use of plant and floral imagery highlights the changes and continuities between unfallen and fallen life in *Paradise Lost*.

Flowers appear in both heaven and Eden, highlighting the beauty of God's presence. In heaven, the flowers are eternal and unchanging, while in Eden, they grow and change. Adam and Eve's care for the garden is develops and strengthens their relationship with each other and with God. After the fall, the garden suffers along with Adam and Eve, but also is a conduit of God's grace.

Heaven is a place of beauty, and flowers are a part of that beauty in Milton's epic. Beautiful scent is often mentioned along with flowers in *Paradise Lost*. The demon Mammon says in Book Two that God's altar in heaven "breathes/Ambrosial Odours and Ambrosial Flowers" (2.245). For Milton, flowers are not only a visual experience, but also involve fragrance, something that he appreciated as a blind man. The "Immortal Amarant" is one of the plants growing in heaven (3.353). According to Roy Flannagan in *The Riverside Milton*, Christian legend tells that the amarant (or amaranth) was moved from earth to heaven after the fall because it was a perfect, undying flower (Flannagan, 426) and the fallen earth was unworthy of it. As God's dwelling place, heaven is perfect and permanent.

There also roses in Milton's heaven (2.364). John Gerard's *The Herbal or General History of Plants: The Complete 1633 Edition as Revised and Enlarged by Thomas Johnson*, written in Milton's time, shows the importance of roses to writers and gardeners in the seventeenth century: "the Rose doth deserue the cheifest and most principall place among all flours whatsoeuer; being not onely esteemed for his beautie, vertues, and his fragrant and odiferous smell, but also because it is the honor and ornament of our English Scepter" (Gerard, 1259). It is fitting that Milton emphasizes the presence of roses in heaven. Heaven is perfect, and so should have the best imaginable flowers. Since roses were a symbol of royalty, it is fitting that God, the king of the universe has roses in his presence.

In contrast, Milton depicts hell as a place that lacks all of heaven's beauty, including flowers. In hell, he uses plants mainly as similes and metaphors. The actual plants are not present, but provide images to help readers picture the unknown. This absence of flowers parallels the absence of God's presence in hell. Images of dead plants describe the living death the demons experience. Milton compares the demons to "autumnal leaves" (1.303) and "scattered sedge/Afloat" (1.305-6), both images of dead plants. Later in book 1, Milton compares the demons to scorched trees:

…they stood,
Their glory withered. As when heaven's fire
Hath scathed the forest oaks, or mountain pines,
With singèd top their stately growth though bare
Stands on the blasted heath. (1.611-15)

The plant similes emphasize the ugliness and death of hell. The demons may not be dead, but they have experienced significant loss of their former splendor, and Milton's use of dead and dying plants corresponds to the true life that the demons lost.

Hell is a place that breeds darkness, not light and life. The things that grow there are not flowers, but unnatural monsters: "Where all life dies, death lives and nature breeds,…/Gorgons and hydras, and chimeras dire" (1.625,628). In *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry*, Don Cameron Allen points out that "absence from God is symbolized throughout the epic by a privation of light" (103). Since hell lacks God's presence and therefore light, things that require life, such as plants, cannot live there. The conditions of hell stand in contrast to Eden as well as heaven.

Unfallen Eden is beautiful, abundant and nurturing. It has "Groves whose rich Trees wept odorous Gumms and Balme" (4.349) and "Flours of all hue, and without Thorn the Rose" (4.256). Flannagan point out that much like amaranth in heaven, thornless roses were legendary flowers that existed on earth before the fall, when nature was completely nurturing (Flannagan, 449). In lines 258-260 of Book 4, Milton describes the grape vine as not only providing fruit, but also shade. Throughout Book 4 Eden is a wholesome, unmarred garden. The plants in Eden provide food and beauty without dangers such as thorns.

When the angel Raphael recounts the world's creation to Adam in book 7, he says that when the flowers were created on the third day, "Earth now/Seemd like to Heav'n, a seat where Gods might dwell" (7.328-9). For Milton, flowers bring the beauty of heaven down to earth. Eden is less than heaven, but still a place that God deems "good" (7.337). Eden, as part of God's unfallen creation, full of light and life is heaven-like.

Milton describes the garden as "tending to wilde" in 9.212. According to John R. Knott in his article "Milton's Wild Garden," the word wild usually had negative connotations in the seventeenth century and Milton's use of it here would have caught his earlier readers' attention (Knott, 69). In this case "wilde" suggests that Eden "promises pleasures that would seem excessive in any other context," Knott writes (Knott, 70). The Garden of Eden is not the same as any garden after the fall. In Milton's depiction of the pre-fall world, wild did not mean dangerous or undesirable. Unlike conventional English gardens, Eden is "not nice Art/In Beds and curious Knots, but Nature boon/Powrd forth profuse" (4.241-30). The garden does not need strict organization, but its constant growth means that it needs gardeners to keep it from becoming unkempt.

The garden may be unfallen, but it still requires tending from Adam and Eve. Despite being unfallen, Adam and Eve are not perfect, and must work and learn. According to Joanna Piciotto's article "Reforming the Garden: The Experimentalist Eden and 'Paradise Lost,'" "the slow, incremental growth of flowers and their responsiveness to cultivation make them fit emblems for the progress of knowledge" (Picciotto, 57). Adam and Eve must "Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop or bind" because even in an unfallen state, the garden grows out of control (9.210). The flowers that Eve mentions as she reminds Adam of the work they need to do are woodbine, ivy, roses, and myrtle (9.216-19). In *Milton's Eve* Diane Kelsey McColley notes that ivy and woodbine are vines that will destroy whatever they are climbing on if not directed and pruned (McColley, 147). Eve recognizes that she can improve the health and beauty of the garden.

Not only did Milton appreciate the beauty of gardens, he was aware of the work they required, so for him, according to *Milton's Imagery* by Theodore Howard Banks, "a garden with its wholesome herbs and flowers is…the symbol of conscientious and loving interest and of pastoral care" (Banks, 105). Adam and Eve's work in Eden is enjoyable (9.208) because it flows out of their love for the garden and its plants. The garden not only "needs" but also "responds" to Eve's work and care, McColley points out (McColley,

146). Adam and especially Eve build a relationship with the plants through working in the garden.

Milton does not see work as negative and in fact, work in *Paradise Lost* promotes improvement. Adam and Eve are not the only ones who work; according to Picciotto, "even Milton's angels are kept occupied with constant errands" (Picciotto, 44). Before the fall, Picciotto points out, "he [Adam] and Eve never succumb to the temptation to hate their jobs" (Picciotto, 45). Rather, they accept and enjoy working in the garden. In *Paradise Lost*, work is part of the good world God created, not an evil result of the fall. Thus, the flowers God plants in Eden require Adam and Eve to work and care for them.

The flowers are connected not only to Adam and Eve's work and learning, but also to their innocent sexuality. Woodbine (honeysuckle), ivy, roses, and myrtle are "symbols of conjugal love." Eve's attention to them shows her understanding that, as McColley puts it, "their flowering love for each other will remain harmonious in proportion to their participation in the harmony of all creation" (McColley, 147). Flowers provide Adam and Eve's marriage bed. The growth and work that goes into the garden parallels the work Adam and Eve must put into their marriage for it to grow and flourish. Like the garden, Adam and Eve have the capacity to grow, learn and become more complete.

The flowers provide a visual model for marriage as well. Work in the garden is described in terms of marriage: "they led the Vine/To wed her Elm; she spous'd about him twines/Her marriageable arms" (5.215-17). Imagery of garden and imagery of marriage are closely connected in *Paradise Lost*. As McColley points out, harmony in the garden is linked to harmony in Adam and Eve's relationship (147).

Banks observes that most of the flowers Milton uses bloom in spring or early summer, which "represent youth" (107). In Eden, Adam and Eve live in a continual state of youthful springtime bliss. Youth, love and spring go together in conventional thinking. Spring and its flowers are short-lived, as readers know that Adam and Eve's time in Eden will be.

After Adam and Eve sin, all creation, including the flowers suffers, but plants are also agents of grace. As soon as she eats fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Eve begins worshiping the tree (9.795-802). Although she loved plants before sinning, she did not praise them in place of God. Even before Adam has eaten the forbidden fruit, the garden displays the consequences of Eve's sin. The roses he picked for Eve are "faded," just as all Earth is as a result of the fall (9.893). Sin upsets the balance of spring and introduces death to the garden.

Adam and Eve's sin brings death and judgment, as God warned them. They and the whole earth become cursed. The fall causes discord in relationships: Adam and Eve's relationship to God, their relationship with each other, and their relationship with the plants and animals. They must leave the garden, a prospect that deeply grieves Eve.

Eve's lament about leaving Eden shows her relationship to the garden. She says she tended the flowers, and also gave them names. For Milton, naming is a way of acknowledging relationship and requires knowledge. Adam names the animals (8.350-3), but Eve is given the privilege of naming the flowers. John Leonard points out in "Language and Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*" that "to name creatures in Paradise was to know their essences, not just to design convenient designations" and the same is true of Eve and the flowers (Leonard, 131). Eve knows the flowers in a way not even Adam does because she named them.

Eve calls the garden a "nuptial Bowre" in her lament (11.280). To her, leaving the garden also means leaving the bliss of unfallen marriage. In comparison to the garden and because of the fall, the rest of the world is "obscure" and "wilde" (11.283-4). According to the OED, obscure can mean "deficient in light." The fallen world is now one step closer to hell because it has lost some of its light, making it a less ideal environment for plants. "Wilde" in this context does carry the negative connotations that were common in Milton's day. Even before the fall, the plants outside the garden were not tended, and now, after the fall, they will be wild in an unwelcoming sense.

Although the fall brings necessary judgment on Adam, Eve, and the earth, God provides grace even in the punishment. Eating from the tree of knowledge obscured Adam's eyesight, so "Michael from Adam's eyes the Filme remov'd/…then purg'd with Euphrasie and Rue/The visual Nerve" (11.412, 414-15). Flannagan points out that the herbs euphrasy and rue were herbs that Milton, as a blind man, was

familiar with because they were used to improve vision (Flannagan, 672). In the fallen world, infirmity is a problem, but in grace, God provides healing herbs to combat it.

God's grace extends beyond Adam and Eve's needs to the problem of fallen mankind. The process of transplanting provides an image of God's work of grace and redemption through Jesus Christ. In Book 3, God anticipates both the fall and Jesus' sacrifice. He tells Jesus that:

> As in him perish all men, so in thee
> As from a second root shall be restor'd,
> As many as are restor'd, without thee none.
> His crime makes guiltie all his Sons, thy merit
> Imputed shall absolve them who will renounce
> Their own both righteous and unrighteous deeds,
> And live in thee transplanted, and from thee
> Receive new life. (3.288-94)

God uses a gardening metaphor to explain his redemptive plan. Even though Adam and Eve are removed from the garden and separated from God because of their sins, Jesus' sacrifice will allow their repentant descendants to be replanted into relationship with God. This image is fitting especially because to Adam and Eve, gardening means a nurturing, caring relationship. Just as Adam and Eve have cared for the garden, God will care for them and their descendants. A restoration to the garden means a restoration of the relationships that were broken when they sinned.

Milton uses of floral imagery to highlight key traits of life with and without God. Heaven is a place of beauty, joy and immortal flowers. Likewise, Eden before the fall is full of beautiful flowers, but here the flowers require loving care and guidance. The flowers in Eden are part of Adam and Eve's development in learning how to live in community with each other and how to tend the garden. After the fall, the flowers on earth suffer the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin, but also are a means of God providing grace, both through healing herbs and as a metaphor of new life in Jesus Christ. Hell lacks God's grace and therefore also lacks flowers. For Milton, flowers are a fitting way of conveying the unfaded beauty of the pre-fall world and the hope of continued beauty and redemption after the fall.

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