

1978

Temptation

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Recommended Citation

Pecheux, M. C. (1978). Temptation. In *A Milton Encyclopedia*. Vol VIII. Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press.

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TEMPTATION. Temptation occupies central position in Milton's thought; it is a major theme of his major works, from *Mask* to *SA*; it is closely associated with free will, always one of his preoccupations.

Milton shared with his contemporaries the psychological* view of temptation which involved a belief in the hierarchy of man's faculties. The will could follow either the higher faculty, reason*, or the lower, passion; in temptation, objects appealing to passion are made to appear desirable; if the temptation is yielded to, passion thus raises itself to a higher position than reason. The process is explained by Adam in *PL* :

But God left free the Will, for what obeys Reason, is free, and Reason he made right
But bid her well beware, and still erect,
Least by some faire appearing good surpris'd
She dictate false, and misinforme the Will
To do what God expressly hath forbid.

(9. 351-55; see also 1127-

Although temptation can, and in many cases does, lead to sin*, still it has a valuable role to play. It serves as a test, and if it is resisted it both demonstrates and increases a man's maturity and fidelity. In *CD* (1 : viii) Milton distinguishes between temptation for evil, permitted by God for such purposes as unmasking hypocrisy or punishing an obdurate sinner, and temptation for good, "whereby God tempts even the righteous for the purpose of proving them, not as though he were ignorant of the disposition of their hearts, but for the purpose of exercising them, manifesting their faith or patience. . . (15 : 87).

In *Mask*, the central scene represents the Lady as she rejects the temptation of Comus; she asserts the freedom of will, which no amount of physical force can constrain. The semi-allegorical treatment here is a first sketch of the developed psychological treatment in *PL*. Here Milton, following 1 Timothy 2 : 14, distinguishes two kinds of temptation : Adam because her reason is deceived, and Eve because she deliberately follows passion rather than reason. Most critics find no serious problem with Milton's treatment of the steps that led to

Fall^o; they see such preliminary incidents as Eve's reaction to her reflection in the pool, her dream, Adam's tendency to idolize Eve, partly as narrative episodes designed to prepare for the climax, partly as warnings that should have led both Adam and Eve to greater self-knowledge. Some, however, contend that such previous "gestures," as Stein calls them, constitute a yielding to temptation and therefore a sin (see particularly the exchange between Millicent Bell and Wayne Shumaker in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 68 [1953] and 70 [1955]). The controversy revolves around the distinction between temptation and sin, between an attraction to evil and a consent to it. Milton distinguishes between the desire of sinning and the act of sin itself; Adam explains to Eve that evil that comes into the mind but is not approved by the reason leaves no spot of blame (*PL* 5. 117-21).

Another controversy stems from an apparent similarity between Eve's (presumably faulty) reasoning that temptation will redound to her credit and the sentiments (presumably acceptable) expressed in *Areop*: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary" (4: 311). Eve maintains (rightly) that a temptation overcome brings double honor, blithely overlooking the possibility that she might not overcome. She is perhaps on firmer ground when she suggests that a life sheltered from all temptation is not exactly the life God has designed for them. But she is not alert enough to make the distinction between seeking temptation and accepting trial that comes "unsought" (*PL* 9. 370). In any case, *Areop* is talking about fallen man, so that the parallelism with Eve's remarks is faulty.

In *PR* Christ, the Perfect Man, under-

goes the temptations to which all men are subject; in doing so he demonstrates how Adam should have acted, and he restores to man the power to overcome. Elizabeth Pope examines the tradition, known to Milton, that the threefold sin of Adam—concupiscence, avarice, and pride—is the embodiment of all sins (cf. 1 John 2: 16: "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"); it is precisely the temptations to these sins that Christ overcomes. *PR* is the story of "one mans firm obedience fully tri'd" (1. 4); by the end of the poem he has "aveng'd / Supplanted *Adam*, and by vanquishing / Temptation, hast regain'd lost Paradise" (4. 606-8).

SA shows a man who once has fallen now resisting temptation, thereby reinstating himself in God's favor. Milton's consistency of thought through a long lifetime is suggested by the similarity between the Lady of *Mask*, who puts by the proffered glass with the contemptuous words, "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my minde / With all thy charms" (663-64), and the blind prisoner who asserts his hard-won immunity from temptation: "Thy fair enchanted cup, and warbling charms / No more on me have power" (*SA* 934-35). No man is tempted beyond his strength; the Father's words about Adam might serve as epitome for the characters in *Mask*, *PL*, *PR*, and *SA*, as well as for every man: "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (*PL* 3. 99). [MCP]