

Mandy Green. *Milton's Ovidian Eve*.

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Ovid was perhaps the most volatile and least reputable of the classical poets on Milton's reading list, a complicated kind of challenge and resource for a Puritan poet. Green applies a fresh canvass of Milton's involvement with Ovidian material to an important topic in Milton criticism, the characterization of Eve, and offers a series of studies of how particular mythological figures in Ovid are invoked in Milton's depiction of the first woman and her role in sacred history. Milton signals the first of these, Narcissus, with particular forcefulness when Eve becomes entranced with her own beauty in the first moments of her existence, and that scene has been intensively studied. There are salient critical traditions on some other Ovidian figures as well — Daphne, Proserpina — but Green is innovative in treating an extended sequence of them (Flora, Venus, Diana, Pomona, Pyrrha, and others) with uniform seriousness. The project is executed with a disciplined

thoroughness suggesting, mostly in a good way, the book's origins as a dissertation. That discipline can be a limitation, a single-mindedness that risks generating connections that those not already with the program might not think worth the trouble. Green wants Eurydice on her list — as a “potent presence in the narrative” (181n1) — even though “no open allusion is to be found in *Paradise Lost*” to the story (177); other cases do involve open allusions. Making the link requires detouring through the sonnet “Methought I saw my late espoused Saint,” and also showing no interest in the fact that there the obvious anterior text, in all regards a better fit, is in the *Aeneid*. Generally, though, Green's ingenuity is well placed. A deft proposal, for instance, about why Adam is first seen by Eve under a plane tree draws, as it happens, on passages in Virgil and Horace, but acquires cogency within the network of associations generated by the story of Pomona (131). The point involves an intelligently documented correction to Alastair Fowler's note; Green is scrupulous about citing relevant previous comment, and she devotes a fair amount of her space — possibly more than she really needs to — to situating her argument in a detailed way within that grid (though critics do not make it into her index). There is no consistent polemical agenda in these citations (except perhaps impatience with the more severe feminist dismissals of Milton's poem), but they subtend some interesting general trends in what Green has to say.

In the main, Green sees Ovid strengthening in Milton's portrayal of Eve a capacity for combining incommensurable opposites. This capacity plays a role in representing unfallen reality. Associations with Flora and Proserpina, through an artful overlay of similarity and contrast, establish Eve as tender of a garden both similar to and unimaginably different from gardens we know: “fruits do not appear after the flowers sequentially in time. . . . In the continuous unfolding present of unfallen Eden . . . flowers do not have to be sacrificed for fruit” (88). Eve herself is simultaneously virgin and wife, for whom sexual love is not a deflowering. “Unlike Proserpina . . . Eve's virginity is shed rather than forcibly plucked” (153), and, in that spirit, “for Adam and Eve every night is their wedding night” (152). Green does not, however, stop with the Fall. She impressively organizes a discussion of Book 9 around Milton's comparison of the fallen Adam and Eve to Deucalion and Pyrrha after the flood. What transpires is a blessed confounding of gender roles that yields a human version of the divine grace which is, unknown to Adam and Eve, already at work: “Through the mediation of Ovidian myth, ‘softness’ is no longer a designation of gender weakness: it has assumed a transcendent value ensuring Eve's reconciliation to Adam, man's reconciliation to God and mankind's spiritual regeneration” (201). Of the scenes in question, Green concedes, “a satisfactory reading . . . does not require the reader to recognize the part Ovidian myth plays here” (187); the same might be said of much of Green's project, but that is hardly in literary criticism a fatal concession. Green has a skillfully conceived and worked out case to make, and makes it well.

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