

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Man of the day:

A Real Man

How would you imagine a grown man in the prime of his youth, sinless and innocent?

Dear reader, you may have heard people in our time complain about “toxic masculinity,” a silly phrase if there ever was one. Call it “manliness” instead. Can there be anything poisonous about manliness? About a man who is strong of body and will,

courageous, far-seeing, gentle with those he loves, firm in upholding what is good and right, fair to others even at his own expense, a plain dealer, not

burdening other people with his feelings, ready to give his sweat and blood for his neighbor in need, and to lay down his life for the woman he loves, and his children?

A mighty post set firm in the earth may offend you – if you’re a termite. A harpoon on the shoulder of a strong and fearless sailor may offend you – if you’re a shark. We are not supposed to be termites or sharks.

How would you imagine perfect manliness, in the garden of Eden? That was the task John Milton set himself when he wrote *Paradise Lost*.

Don’t be afraid to continue, dear reader. I

know that some poems make you itch. This won’t. I will help you, too.

Milton meditated on the verse that we’ve heard all our lives: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth” (Gen. 1:26). When we meet Adam in Eve in Milton’s poem, we are meeting the happy

pair whom God has intended to be the king and queen *over the entire physical creation*. All of it – all the animals, the trees, the flowers, the streams and rivers and lakes and oceans, and even the

stars above.

If we saw them we’d be tempted to fall down before them and worship them, even though they are human beings as we are – our father and mother. That is before the sin.

Here is what Milton says:

*Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honor clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The glorious image of their Maker shone.*

That wasn’t so hard, was it? Let me pause to



explain something. Adam and Eve are tall, standing upright rather than leaning over the ground like the brute beasts. They are *clad in naked majesty*, which is the finest garment that a pure soul can wear. In their faces the glorious image of God shines forth. How does it shine? In these features:

*Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe, but in true filial freedom placed.*

That is a tough phrase, “filial freedom.” Imagine that you own and run a farm, which is a lot of work. Imagine that your son has grown up on the farm, and he has always been a good son, learning your ways and sharing your work. Now he is a grown man. You trust him, as if he were your own right arm. Think of the freedom that your son really does enjoy, because he does his father's will and shares in his father's enterprises. He is about his father's business, as the boy Jesus was. We are free when we acknowledge God to be our Father, and we do His will. For God desires sons, not slaves. We cannot be free otherwise. We can have no real authority otherwise.

Milton continues:

*Though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed:
For contemplation he and valor formed;
For softness she and sweet attractive grace;
He for God only, she for God in him.*

Before your flesh breaks out into shingles here, consider. What do the body and the face of the man suggest? The deep-set eyes and the firm

brow and the large forehead, the broad shoulders and the sturdy bones, what if not contemplation and valor? And what do the body and the face of the woman suggest? The smooth cheek and chin, the rounded head, the silky strands of hair, the childlike but not childish voice, the yielding flesh and the curve of breast and hip, what if not the sweet grace that Milton notices?

Let us finish the portraits:

“He is about his father’s business, as the boy Jesus was. We are free when we acknowledge God to be our Father, and we do His will. For God desires sons, not slaves.”

*His fair large front and
eye sublime declared*

*Absolute rule, and
hyacinthine locks*

*Round from his parted
forelock manly hung*

*Clustering, yet not
beneath his shoulders*

broad;

*She as a veil down to the
slender waist*

Her unadorned golden

tresses wore

*Disheveled, yet in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection, but required with modest sway,
And by her yielded, by him best received,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.*

All right, there are a couple of tricky words in there. “Hyacinthine” means “curly,” like the petals of the hyacinth flower. “Reluctant” means here that you hold back a little, in play. “Sway” means “government,” which in Adam is supposed to be “modest,” meaning that he governs with a light hand. The man and the woman are like perfectly matched dancers in a dance. He leads gently and she is proud to follow his lead, and that is as both he and she like it best.

Adam is strikingly handsome, but he doesn’t

appear to decorate himself. He doesn't need to. If you saw him you would be drawn immediately to what is most godlike in him, and most manly: the eyes – where truth and wisdom and sanctitude shine, and whence he looks upon the world around him in appreciation and contemplative thought. His eye is *sublime*. He is like an eagle. If he should blush, it would be for our sin and stupidity, which would be naked to his eyes, no matter how cleverly we disguise it for ourselves and other people.

That's what we were meant to be. In no man since Adam can we find that first purity of vision, that severe love, and that manly commitment to the truth no matter what it may cost, if not in Jesus Christ, the second Adam. We are meant to be like him now. When a man grows nearer to Christ he becomes not less manly but more, always more. Who would greet such manliness with hatred and disdain? My readers may suggest his name.



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Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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