For the most part, presumptuous, adventurous, and bold behavior is associated with fallen characters in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Satan, for example, as he willfully journeys past every barrier in pursuit of his goal, is repeatedly described as bold. And, after she eats the apple, Eve too is described (by Adam) as “bold,” “presumptuous,” and “adventurous” (IX 921). There is however one character in the text who behaves this way yet is neither a fallen character nor shown to fall as a consequence of this behavior—that being, Adam, when he asks God for a companion. Though it is typical of Adam to circumscribe his freedom—as he does, for example, after Raphael warns him his interest in the heavens is becoming lustful—and though we are most familiar with the willful act which dooms him, Adam relentlessly pursues his claim to a companion and does not stop until he achieves his “heart’s desire” (VIII 451). And though this encounter, especially as it advances, has all the feel of a trial that is testing Adam’s disobedience rather than his obedience, it likely surprises by actually proving one where Adam demonstrates his righteous use of his God-given freedom.

One of the things Raphael does which convinces Adam to desist in his inquiry into the make-up of the heavens, is to remind him of all he has already been given by God. Raphael advises Adam to take “joy [. . .] / In what he gives to thee, this Paradise / And fair Eve” (VIII, 170-73), and reminds him of how God had “bid dwell far off all anxious cares” (185). However, later in book VIII, when Adam tells Raphael how he received Eve from God, he relates to him how, despite having just been given Paradise to lord over, and having being told that Paradise is a place where he need not “fear [. . .] dearth” (322), he chose not to “check” (189) his “apprehension [that] [. . .] in these / [he] [. . .] found not what [he] thought [he] [. . .] wanted still” (355). Instead, Adam tells Raphael he pressed God for more. Asking for more after already having received so much is a presumptive thing to have done, and by characterizing his request as “presumptuous” (367), Adam shows he knows as much himself. Though he doesn’t yet know that overreach is what doomed Satan, and what will doom Eve, he obviously has some sense that after already having received so much, to presume to ask God for more is at the very least inappropriate, and possibly, that it amounts to a significant trespass.

Though in his pursuit of “more” Adam may remind us of Satan’s ingratitude, the way Adam responds to God’s gifts may have us thinking more of Jesus from
Paradise Regained than of Satan from Paradise Lost. For just as Jesus responds to Satan’s presentations in Paradise Regained of, for example, “a table richly spread” (II 340) and a “wide domain / In ample territory” (IV 81-82), by informing him that he has offered him nothing of value, Adam responds to God’s declaration that “Not only these fair bounds, but all the earth / To thee and to thy race I give” (VIII 338-39), by implying that God has failed to provide him with anything that will make him (Adam) happy or content (364-66). I draw this parallel to illustrate just how audaciously Adam begins his argument. Though Adam takes great care to avoid arousing God’s anger when he speaks to him, his reply to God’s gift-giving gesture nevertheless risks momentarily making God seem as impotent and foolish as Jesus’ reply to Satan’s lavish offerings made Satan seem.

God is not displeased with Adam, and my guess is that most readers are not surprised in this. For even if Adam is behaving outlandishly, God, after all, is (here still) a permissive deity, and Adam doesn’t thus far seem to have disobeyed. However, when Adam chooses to persist beyond the obstacle which had previously inhibited his pursuit of further knowledge of the heavens, we likely become less sure as to how God will react.

When Raphael told Adam his interest in the heavens was not sinful, that “To ask or search I blame thee not” (VIII 66), he followed by none the less trying to dissuade Adam in his concern to know more about them. He told Adam to “admire” (75) God’s creations, to be content with what he has, and to “Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid” (167). Similarly, though God smiles at Adam to let him know he has not (yet) transgressed, he follows by reminding Adam that his “realm is large,” and orders him to “Find pastime, and bear rule” (375). And when, despite recognizing God’s reply as an “order” (VIII 377), Adam chooses to proceed, we likely feel that he is (tres)passing into very uncertain territory. Adam understands that by proceeding he may be transgressing beyond a barrier intended to hem him in—this being, of course, God’s command that he desist and find happiness in all that had already been provided. And in fact, much like Satan before entering the abyss, Adam prepares himself as if embarking on a perilous journey. He implores God not to “Let [his] […] words offend [him]” (379), and thereby is likely trying “to ward of the potential punishment by anticipating it” (Forsyth 119). But Adam does not advance meekly; instead, we sense his boldness, his aggressiveness, even his arrogance in his subsequent response to God.

Adam becomes judgmental and assertive. We sense his willfulness, for example,
when he states that mismatched pairs “soon prove / Tedium alike: of fellowship I
speak / Such as I seek” (VIII, 389-90; emphasis added). An encounter which began
with God’s assertiveness, His egoism, dearly evident in the text (the result, in part, of
the accumulating declarative statements God makes: “I have set” [324], “I warn thee”
[327], “I give” [339], “I bring” [343]), is becoming one where Adam is the more
active and assertive of the pair. And though we are again told that God was “not
displeased” (398) with Adam, we may not be much assuaged by God’s reaction, for
God responds to Adam’s assertiveness as if baiting him into making the same
mistake that doomed Satan. That is, as if sensing that this encounter is becoming a
battle of wills, God, in effect, sets Adam up—by making it so he must argue himself
not just god-like but God’s superior in order to “win” their debate!

God tells Adam that he “see[s]” “A nice and subtle happiness” (VIII 399) in
Adam’s state, and invites Adam to imagine how he (God), purportedly as isolated as
Adam, feels. In order to prove to God that he truly is unhappy, then, Adam must
both demonstrate he sees better than God does and that he has insight into the state
of, if not God’s mind, then at least His heart. Now rather than call God shortsighted,
Adam takes care to stress how “All human thoughts come short” (414) to that of
God, and Adam is otherwise very self-deprecating in this passage. However, Adam
nevertheless indirectly suggests that God’s sight has not provided with him with
insight into the state of Adam’s mind/heart, and he does speculate as to the nature of
God’s “need[s]” (419). And, after Adam finishes having “emboldened sp[oke]”
(434), after having dared “to have equalled [or surpassed the reasoning/debating
skills of] the most High” (I 40), he is handsomely rewarded with his “heart’s desire”
(VIII 451).

God rewards Adam for the “permissive” (VIII 435) use of his reason and
freedom, but given how presumptuous he was just to initiate his request, how bold
he was to disobey God’s apparent order and persist, and how adventurous he was to
advance an argument which at times risked making God seem foolish and himself
God-like, we might still feel that God rewards Adam here for the same sort of
indulgent, disobedient behavior that doomed Satan and Eve. The likelihood we
sense he got away with one is considerable, since emboldened characters normally are
the ones punished in Paradise Lost, and since Adam normally circumscribes his
freedom, as he does, for instance, when he learns his interest in the heavens is
becoming lustful.

For me, at least, the non-typical nature of this encounter draws my interest in the
same way that nature’s “disproportions” drew Adam’s (VIII 7): it also excites me to be presumptuous. Though my purpose here has been largely to focus on the oddity of Adam being rewarded for the sort of presumptuous, adventurous, and bold behavior which normally dooms characters in Paradise Lost, I cannot help but finish by speculating as to why this aberration exits. Though Adam is the only character in the text rewarded for behaving this way, there is another around who does the same but has not yet received judgment for doing so—that being, the narrator, or, if you will, Milton himself. My conjecture, then: perhaps if it was easier for the narrator/Milton to initiate his own admittedly “adventurous” (I 13), ambitious, and “presum[ptuous]” (VII 13) epic “song” (I 13) when he knew he would tell/sing of at least one man who “aim[ed]” “ambitious[ly]” (I 41), yet avoided being “Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky” (45) for doing so.

Works Cited