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Honors Thesis

Eve in the Image of Man: Feminist Concerns in Paradise Lost

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John Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost (1667) follows the story of creation, the transformation of Lucifer to Satan, and the eventual fall of humanity. Traditional readings of this poem that focus on Milton's portrayals of Adam and Eve purport that the text presents an unflinchingly misogynistic view of women. In Paradise Lost there is a definite gender hierarchy at work. This hierarchy is constructed by certain binaries that separate the world of the male from that of the female. Examples of these binaries are rampant throughout the text; men use reason, women do not. Men are strong and women are weak. Men have a closer connection to God – generally face-to-face – while women access God through an intermediary.

However, throughout the poem, Milton presents conflicting evidence about Eve's character and the place of women. The text offers ambiguity, refusing to completely demonize or vindicate the women. This ambiguity is evident first through Eve's use of reason, which contradicts the assumption that she is subordinate; second, the text subtly offers non-traditional readings of the Fall which share the blame for sin with men, rather than placing all responsibility on the woman; and third, the narrative ends with man and wife comforting one another as equals in the fallen world.

Eve In the Image of Man: Feminist Concerns in *Paradise Lost*

“*Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self / Before me; Woman is her Name*”

(VIII.495-6)

At first glance, John Milton seems a strong proponent of sharply defined gender roles of the sort generally accepted in the seventeenth century. However, his texts frequently engage in small departures from the strictly patriarchal norm, and it is these departures that create space for feminist rereadings. While Milton cannot be labeled a proto-feminist, aware of issues before his time, he leaves evidence in his writing of complex—sometimes untraditional—thought on the issues of gender roles, marriage, and the place of women in a primarily Protestant society.

In the England of the late Renaissance, gender roles were carefully guarded: “Women did not hold civil or ecclesiastical offices, attend universities, or engage in the major professions” (McColley 149). Rather, these were the occupations of men, while women were restricted to the world of marriage and the home. Maureen Quilligan sees the entire English economy playing a role in constructing these two gendered worlds:

It is a staple argument of feminist history that an invidious impasse for the devaluation of women’s work was that moment when the development of capitalism cut the home off from the workplace, not merely alienating the worker from his labor but ensuring that female (“unpaid”) household work would have no value in the new economy, unlike the disposition of work in the feudal household which was a place both of production and consumption. (226)

While the growing and changing economic structure in England reinforced the difference between men and women's work, the changes brought about by the Reformation constricted the space allowed for women within Christianity. During the Renaissance, England underwent a shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, beginning with Henry VIII's creation of the Church of England. This change especially affected women, as Protestantism "encouraged patriarchal language...[and] removed from the liturgy and from church decoration much of the feminine imagery associated with the Virgin Mary and other women saints" (McColley 150). By displacing the powerful females of Catholicism, the Reformation left women with no religious icons of their own gender; at the same time, the Reformation's return to the Bible refocused attention on stories such as the Fall in Genesis. Renaissance men then used religion to justify gender hierarchy. McColley explains, "Coupled with the story that Eve was the first to disobey God and enticed her husband to do likewise, Genesis thus affords excuses for misogyny" (150).

Milton was a significant voice in the Protestant discussion of gender, in both his poetry and prose. His interest especially focused on marriage, divorce, and love within the Pauline tradition. In addition to Paradise Lost (1667) and Samson Agonistes (1671) and their portrayals of marriage, Milton wrote several prose tracts on divorce, including Tetrachordon (1645) and The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643). The Divorce Tracts in particular show how Milton wrote primarily from within the patriarchal tradition but still challenged and undermined the very assumptions he defended. In the same passage, Milton moves between "sexist language" and "partial mitigation" (McColley 154-55). He says, "The woman is not primarily and immediately the image of God, but in reference to the man. The head of the woman, said [Paul], 1 Cor. 11. is the

man: he the image and glory of God, she the glory of the man: not he for her, but she for him.” Despite the misogyny of the previous passage, he immediately adds “Nevertheless man is not to hold her as a servant....Not but that particular exceptions may have place, if she exceed her husband in prudence and dexterity, and he contentedly yeeld, for then a superior and more naturall law comes in, that the wiser should govern the lesse wise, whether male or female” (qtd. in McColley 155). By suggesting that gender may be preempted by intelligence, Milton creates opportunity for more equality in marriage, and possibly encourages the breakdown of strict gender roles. However, it is unsurprising that this quote is flanked on both sides by “sexist language” and affirmation of patriarchal standards. As McColley puts it, “This habit of taking with one hand while giving with the other” is typical of Milton’s writing (155). At the same time, “when Milton challenges stereotypes he inevitably risks activating them” (Lewalski 443). As so many critics have noted, Milton tendency to contradict, affirm, and then again challenge traditions creates ideological complexity, leaving room for feminist rereadings.

This shifting position is very much a part of Paradise Lost and its descriptions of Eve. While the text primarily paints Eve as a lesser creature, subject to Adam, instances of contrary evidence suggest equality between husband and wife. The two versions of woman in Paradise Lost—subject or equal—have encouraged much critical controversy over the epic poem. Is it a work of feminism, misogyny, or perhaps somewhere in between?¹ Janet Halley sums up the feminist critical history of the poem, saying:

The early feminist critics of Paradise Lost read Eve as a product of Miltonic misogyny...Their essays initiated a vigorous controversy, in which women critics have rebutted the early feminist analysis. Barbara K.

Lewalski wrote a sharp retort to Marcia Landy; Joan Malory Webber rebutted Sandra Gilbert in a posthumously published article; and Diane K. McColley countered the feminist critique of Milton in a book-length defense of his Eve. In the process of this debate, the term “feminist” as a descriptor of Milton criticism has become multivalent, referring both to critics who see Eve as the object of Milton’s patriarchal imagination and to others to whom she is the image of a genuine female subjectivity not created but recognized by a progressive, liberal Milton. (230)

The diverse critical response to Milton, and especially the focus on gender roles and women within the text, is also in keeping with the epic nature of Paradise Lost. In epic poetry females have always been sharply divided from men. It is not unusual for the genders to have very separate roles. Women are traditionally aligned with marriage, children, and the home, while men go on long, wandering journeys full of battle, adventure, and tests of wits.² Even though men generally see all the action, and thus dominate the genre, epic is above all concerned with human experience. This is especially true of Paradise Lost, with its focus on human beginnings. A. Bartlett Giamatti describes the central role of woman in epic:

The epic is often concerned with exile and the way back, and woman is always at the center. She is often both the goal and the obstacle....

Sometimes she is both the reason we wander and the object we seek, because only where she is are we at home. Such a woman is Helen, or Eve, Eve who causes our exile from the Garden and from the Father, and

Eve with whom we find a new homestead and by whose sons we become fathers ourselves. (20)

This passage affirms the central importance of women even within a genre that focuses on the dynamic actions of men. But at the same time, Giamatti's sentiments also buy into a traditional view of Eve, accepting as fact her lone culpability in the "exile from the Garden and from the Father." John Milton's Paradise Lost does not unequivocally share this flat, one-sided conception of Eve. While masculinist and sometimes misogynist attitudes play a role in the characterization of Eve, there are places where the patriarchy of the poem breaks down.

In Paradise Lost a definite gender hierarchy is at work. This hierarchy is constructed by certain binaries that separate the world of the male from that of the female. Examples of these binaries are rampant throughout the text; men use reason, women do not. Men are strong and women are weak. Men have a closer connection to God—generally face-to-face—while women access God through an intermediary. From the moment Milton introduces Adam and Eve, he establishes male superiority. "Thir sex not equal seem'd," Satan notes, as he views the pair for the first time, "For contemplation hee and valor form'd, / For softness shee and sweet attractive grace, / Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (IV.296-99). In humanity's introduction, Milton establishes the concept of inequality, and the binaries that will divide men and women. The genders are meant for different ends; men have the loftier purpose of reasoning, learning, and worshipping God. Woman, on the other hand, is described as attractive and devoted to her husband. He even mediates her worship as she seeks "God in him" rather than "God only."

However, Milton does not cling consistently to these sharply diametric oppositions. Throughout the poem, Milton presents conflicting evidence about Eve's character and the place of women. The text offers ambiguity, refusing to completely demonize or vindicate the woman. This ambiguity is evident first through Eve's use of reason, which contradicts her position as subordinate; second, the text subtly offers non-traditional readings of the Fall which share the blame for sin with men, rather than placing all responsibility on the woman; and third, the narrative ends with man and wife comforting one another as equals in the fallen world.

There is, however, very little sympathy for Eve at first glance. She frequently seems shallow. Her mind, Milton repeatedly reminds the reader, is by nature not as lofty or quick as Adam's, and she always focuses on the lesser version of things. After all, Adam "his bone...lent" to make her, and she is his "image of myself" rather than, like him, an image of God (IV.483; V.95). Angels remind Adam that she is "less excellent," and she proves every allegation against her when she decides to frolic in the flowers rather than listen to angelic warnings about the devil (VIII.566). And Milton explains why she fails to learn from Raphael by saying she was "not with such discourse / delighted, or not capable her ear / of what was high" (VIII.48-50). Not only is her mind supposedly incapable of comprehending complex messages, but also she would rather learn everything secondhand from Adam with "conjugal Caresses" interspersed throughout (VIII.56).

As she tells the story of her creation, Eve begins by belittling herself, denying herself equal status with Adam. "Thou / like consort to thyself canst nowhere find," she commiserates with her husband (IV. 446-7). And she who was created to be Adam's

“likeness, thy fit help, thy other self, / thy wish, exactly to thy heart’s desire”—that is, the equal he requested—paints a picture of herself as vain and highly susceptible to suggestion (VIII.450-1). Upon awakening, Eve looks at herself in a lake and falls in love with her image. It takes the voice of God to draw her away from her Narcissus-like³ contemplation of herself, and even then she would return to gazing at the lake if it weren’t for Adam’s impassioned plea for her to join him instead. Eve tells the story:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
 I first awak’t, and found myself repos’d
 Under a shade on flow’rs, much wond’ring where
 And what I was, whence thither brought, and how.
 Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
 Of waters issu’d from a Cave and spread
 Into a liquid Plain, then stood unmov’d
 Pure as th’ expanse of Heav’n; I thither went
 With unexperienc’t thought, and laid me down
 On the green bank, to look into the clear
 Smooth Lake, that to me seem’d another Sky.
 As I bent down to look, just opposite,
 A Shape within the wat’ry gleam appear’d
 Bending to look on me, I started back,
 It started back, but pleas’d I soon return’d,
 Pleas’d it return’d as soon with answering looks
 Of sympathy and love; there I had fixt

Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire,
 Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest,
 What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself,
 With thee it came and goes; but follow me,
 And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
 Thy coming, and thy soft imbraces, hee
 Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy
 Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear
 Multitudes like thyself, and thence be call'd
 Mother of human Race: what could I do,
 But follow straight, invisibly thus led? (IV.449-476)

Superficially this episode only shows Eve as narcissistic and easily led, but a closer study of the chain of events—from creation, to discovery of the “wat’ry” image, to the decision to leave the pool—reveals Eve’s reasoning abilities. Elsewhere, Milton describes Eve’s thought process, saying that “all higher knowledge in her presence falls / degraded” and reason must “on her wait” (VIII.551-2, 554). But at the time of her creation, things are different. She is, indeed, an equal creation with Adam, equal in her possession of free will, because rather than commanding her to leave her image and take up Adam, God uses reason to convince her. He begins by dispelling her illusions about her reflection in the water. “What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself, / with thee it came and goes,” God explains (IV.468-9). He then tells her why she should choose to come with him, saying, “I will bring thee where no shadow stays / thy coming” and he will give her a husband to whom she “shalt bear / multitudes like thyself” (IV.470-1, 473-4). God’s

argument appeals to Eve's reason; if she enjoys looking at things that look like her, then she will probably enjoy someone whose image she is. And now that God has explained the situation to her, Eve knows her reflection is only just that. It is logical that she would forsake it in order to make with Adam "multitudes like" herself to take its place (IV.474).

This exchange might confirm Eve's reason and free will if not for her troublesome line, "What could I do, / but follow straight, invisibly thus led" (IV.475-6). Doubt in Eve's agency is introduced. Perhaps it is God's power at work drawing Eve away from self-obsession, rather than any intelligence of her own. However, even as Milton's word choice compromises Eve's agency, he gives a second example that insists that she uses reason to choose. God leads her to Adam's side, and she sees him for the first time. He is a disappointment, far "less fair, / less winning soft, less amiably mild" than her "wat'ry image," and so she calmly decides to choose herself instead and return to gazing at the lake (IV.477-9). However, Adam appeals to her with promises of love. Eve logically chooses between a beautiful reflection in the water, and Adam, who can love her back. "I yielded," she recalls (IV.489). The power of action was hers. Still, "yielded" is a deceptive action verb, and so the wording makes Eve's success uncertain. She indeed makes a choice to take a certain action, but she "yields," that is, acts to give up her agency, handing it over in submission. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski explains Eve's thought process and rescues the moment by explaining: "She did not remain fixed forever, enamoured of her watery image, but after listening to the arguments of God and Adam, freely agreed ('I yielded') to reject narcissism, to share love and companionship with Adam in marriage, and to create human society" (Lewalski, 482-83). Eve uses reason immediately after her creation; no one has to explain it to her. It is one of her

innate abilities, and she continues using it throughout the poem, despite the fact that no one—from Adam to Milton himself—admits she uses it validly.

However, even though neither the men of the text nor the author seem anxious to point out Eve's exercise of reason, evidence of it is recurrent. Eve continually undermines the gender hierarchy as she reaches logical conclusions and suggests intelligent ideas ahead of Adam. Lewalski summarizes Eve's achievements thus:

Both before and after the Fall Eve often proposes issues for discussion, initiates action, and leads in some new direction. She first raises questions about the order of the cosmos; she proposes the proto-capitalist idea of the division of labor to help meet the problem of the garden's burgeoning growth; she first responds to "prevenient grace" and makes the first motion to repentance; she proposes suicide or sexual abstinence to prevent visitation of the Fall's effects on humankind. (482)

Interestingly, Eve is also the first one to accept her guilt and sin after the fall, giving a one line answer of "the Serpent me beguil'd, and I did eat," in contrast with Adam's nineteen-line speech full of excuses, name-calling, and blame (X.162). But it is her use of reasoning—at her creation, concerning the division of labor, and with the serpent—that stands out so much, blurring the line of intelligence that Milton so carefully constructed as a division between the sexes. Adam, who is lauded as a creature of the mind, made for "'invisible' and intellectual 'Good Works,'" does spend time seeking knowledge from angels and passing what he knows on to his wife (Quilligan 228). However, there are a great number of intellectual or creative things that Milton gives to Eve first. She is the first to recount the story of human creation, even if her ability to tell

is limited by being the last one to arrive on the scene. She is also artistic before Adam at times, and she “creates the first love lyric,” and “perfects the tragic lyric” before Adam attempts either emotion at depth (Lewalski 482). It seems reasonable to say that these things that Eve discovers, contemplates, and questions are no accident. She is capable of the reasoning that Milton frequently ascribes to Adam.

Milton gives Eve access to reason and a thirst for knowledge, but this aspect of her character becomes problematic. The text wavers before defining Eve’s desire for education as a cause of the Fall. While it first appears that an arrogant desire to be like God drove Eve to take the fruit, Milton interweaves possible excuses that explain her fall in different terms or share the blame equally with other parties. Initially, however, her desire for knowledge opens her up to the lies of the snake. Before she even knows which fruit he ate, Eve follows the serpent to see what tree gave him the power for “speculations high or deep” (IX.602). Once she recognizes the forbidden tree, Satan has to speak fast to keep her from running away, and so he says:

O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant,
 Mother of Science, Now I feel thy Power
 Within me clear, not only to discern
 Things in thir causes, but to trace the ways
 of highest Agents deem’d however wise. (IX.679-83)

The promise of far-reaching wisdom holds her still, and she stays to hear the snake use “persuasive words, impregn’d / with Reason...and with Truth”; it is only after these combined assaults on her intellect that she succumbs to the lie (IX.736-7).⁴ But even the wording of Satan’s address to the tree underscores the problem of assigning blame for the

Fall. He uses words like “sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving” that make the tree and its fruit seem benign or even holy (“sacred”). This part of the announcement captures Eve’s interest, but she stays for the line “*Mother of science, Now I feel thy Power*” (emphasis mine).

Where the first part of Satan’s address appealed to a pure desire for sacred wisdom—a desire Eve might be forgiven for or entitled to—he continues by suggesting female power. If this is the part of the speech that convinces Eve, then she is culpable and responsible for trying to corrupt the partnership with Adam by seeking greater power. Yet at the same time, the line can still be read as part of Eve’s quest for wisdom. Unlike her previous experiences with learning where she is excluded from Raphael’s lectures, and opts to receive information secondhand, the snake hints at a wealth of knowledge that is uniquely feminine. Eve responds to his words by taking the fruit, but it is hard, if not impossible, to tell which part of the lie wins her over. Is Eve acting to gain power, or is she pursuing the “Mother of science” who will presumably not exclude her as Raphael, God, and Adam have done so far? The reader cannot determine Eve’s motivations. This is the same dilemma that plagues her character throughout the whole poem.

Yet again, just as Milton seems to be maligning Eve’s character, he lets extenuating circumstances and excuses crop up. One possible explanation for the unhealthy nature of Eve’s hunger for education may be Satan’s trickery. As he first plots the Fall, Satan swears to “excite thir minds / with more desire to know,” and then he plants the suggestion in Eve’s mind as she sleeps (IV.522-3). In the dream he afflicts her with, Satan is the first to suggest Eve walk through the garden alone, and he is the first to hint that God’s interdiction against the tree is a plot to withhold knowledge. Satan may

have predisposed Eve to listen to his lies, by placing notions in her head during an “uncouth dream, of evil sprung” (V.98).

At the same time, it is difficult to excuse Eve completely. It is true that “the Serpent” her “beguil’d,” but she was forewarned (X.162). “She...receives the same education as Adam,” Lewalski insists, “though not in the same manner.” While Raphael instructed Adam, Eve “listened in silence,” and she was present for most, though not all, of his speech (Lewalski 481). Even when she leaves the scene of the astronomy lesson, she plans to hear about it later from Adam. And she is supposedly aware of the danger in the garden at the time she suggests separating herself from Adam. However, even if Eve was ignorant before, Adam makes sure she understands the quality of the threat. He says:

Thou know’st,
 What hath been warn’d us, what malicious Foe
 Envyng our happiness, and of his own
 Despairing, seeks to work us woe and shame
 By sly assault. (IX.252-56)

She is reminded that Satan uses sly assaults, and her previous knowledge of the problem is invoked. Adam’s warning compounds her culpability, making it less likely that she was innocently beguiled by the snake, as she claims. She must be held responsible for what she has been told—unless the system of education is to blame.

Eve was present for Raphael’s speech, and she was bombarded with long warning speeches from her husband. However, the system the men use to pass information on to the woman is faulty. It begins with the stories of creation. Eve, Raphael, and Adam each tell a version of creation. Each story is similar, but Eve’s lacks a very important aspect.

God does not tell her about the tree of “knowledge of Good and Evil” (VII.544). Adam receives the warning directly from God before he even sees the animals. It is one of the first things he hears from his creator, and Raphael confirms that this is how it happened. “He brought thee into this delicious Grove,” Raphael reminds Adam. God gave Adam dominion over every tree in the garden, “Variety without end; but of the Tree / which tasted works knowledge of Good and Evil, / Thou may’st not; in the day thou eat’st, thou di’st” (VII.537; 542-44). Adam learns directly from the mouth of God what the consequences will be. God tells him specifically what tree to avoid and where it is located—“amid the Garden by the Tree of Life”—and God even sends Raphael to repeat the warning once Satan enters Eden (VIII.326). It is interesting that God sends Raphael to warn Adam after Satan has come to Eve in the night and infiltrated her dreams. God, the angels, and Adam are all aware that Eve is the one who has been contacted by the devil, yet God says to Raphael:

Thou hear’st what stir on Earth
Satan from Hell scap’ t through the darksome Gulf
 Hath rais’ d in Paradise, and how disturb’ d
 This night the human pair, how he designs
 In them at once to ruin all mankind.
 Go therefore, half this day as friend with friend
 Converse with *Adam*. (V.224-230)

This emphasis on heavenly conversation with Adam alone, combined with Eve’s preference to hear everything second-hand from her husband, firmly places Adam in the role of mediator. Milton, relating Eve’s thoughts, refers to Adam as “Her Husband the

Relater” who Eve “preferr’d / Before the Angel” (VIII.52-3). This is problematic because Adam, though he is made for “‘invisible’ and intellectual ‘Good Works,’” and should be perfect, is occasionally chided for attempting to overstep his bounds during lessons with Raphael (Quilligan 228). Adam’s inappropriate questions about the nature of the universe, or love among angels, as well as his imprudent admiration for Eve all earn him heavenly chastisement and cast a shadow over what should be his position as immaculate, perfect, pre-fall man.

In his conversation with Raphael, Adam displays a hunger for knowledge similar to Eve’s, and he also uncovers some of his own shortcomings. Lewalski describes the discussion between man and angel, saying “Adam asked Raphael questions (often framing them faultily)” (481). Adam wants to learn, but has trouble even constructing questions. Once he asks, he pursues topics the angel doubts he needs to understand. Raphael tells him,

Whether Heav’n move or Earth,
imports not, if thou reck’n right; the rest
from Man or Angel the great Architect
did wisely to conceal....

If they list to try

Conjecture, he his Fabric of Heav’ns

Hath left to thir disputes, perhaps to move

His laughter at thir quaint Opinions wide. (VIII.70-3; 75-8)

Raphael does give responses to Adam’s questions, perhaps to correct his “quaint Opinions wide,” and the reader sees how Adam is struck dumb by the angel’s stories.

Even for Adam, “Heav’n is for thee too high” and he must “solicit not [his] thoughts with matters hid” (VIII.172; 167). By openly critiquing the understanding of Eve’s intellectual mediator, the text subtly offers an explanation for her susceptibility to the appeals of the snake—her source of information is imperfect, so she is not properly prepared to withstand the lies of the devil. The exact words Raphael uses to chide Adam are especially poignant. His statement, “Heaven is for thee too high,” mimics the wording of the reason Eve cannot learn easily from Raphael—“not capable her ear / of what was high” (VIII.172; VIII.49-50). This phrasing links Eve and Adam, indicating that they both suffer from the same distance from heaven, and it affects male and female proportionately.

Neither Adam nor Eve learns perfectly, even pre-fall. Milton’s Eden is unbiblical in this regard, creating a shared blame for humanity’s fall by placing a flawed system of education in what should be a perfect garden. And while the text never openly places blame on Adam or God, accusing the patriarchy of perpetuating harmful inequalities, the language of the poetry post-fall emphasizes the need for equality. It is marriage, and a focus on a non-hierarchized partnership, that reconciles Adam and Eve when they are at their most estranged after the Fall. However, they do not make this transition painlessly. At the height of his rage, Adam completely separates himself from Eve, placing her in league with the snake. He says:

Out of my sight, thou Serpent, that name best
 Befits thee with him leagu-d, thyself as false
 And hateful; nothing wants, but that thy shape
 Like his, and color Serpentine may show

Thy inward fraud....⁵ (X.867-72)

In this passage, Adam does not even give Eve the dignity of her name, and his tirade on her appearance is yet another form of rejection. He believes Eve to be made in his own image, and by wishing her physically snake-like, Adam divorces himself from her. His speech post-Fall starkly opposes the wedding speech he made at Eve's creation. Then Adam said:

To give thee being I lent
 Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart
 Substantial Life, to have thee by my side
 Henceforth an individual solace dear;
 Part of my Soul I seek thee, and thee claim
 My other half. (IV.483-88)

He now rejects Eve's position as his "other half," and the "solace dear" she provides, and instead creates a rift between them. However, this dissention cannot last. God's son already appeared to Adam and Eve and cursed the serpent with the promise of "enmity...between thine and her [Eve's] Seed" (X.180). Perhaps with this promise in mind, Eve makes the suggestion of equal partnership and a common goal, which finally reconciles husband and wife. She begs Adam, "Between us two let there be peace, both joining, / as join'd in injuries, one enmity / against a Foe by doom express assign'd us, / That cruel Serpent" (X.924-27). Her suggestion does not have room for hierarchy, focusing instead on "both joining" as "one enmity / against a Foe." This rational argument for peace and partnership works in a way her "soft words" previously did not (X.865). Adam concedes.

This seems to be the moment Milton built toward in the first half of the poem. Now everything comes together: Adam and Eve are in a situation they both brought about, the woman devises a logical solution, and that solution abolishes the faulty hierarchy that brought them to the Fall. However, as always, what Milton's text gives in one line, it takes away in the next. Adam hears Eve's proposition of equal partnership against Satan and accepts it, but the text leaves no doubt that he does so for sexist reasons:

Soon his heart relented
 Towards her, his life so late and sole delight,
 Now at his feet *submissive in distress*,
 Creature so fair his reconcilment seeking,
 His counsel whom she had displeas'd, his aid;
 As one disarm'd, his anger all he lost,
 And thus with peaceful words uprais'd her soon. (X.940-46, emphasis
 mine)

From this description of Adam's response to Eve, he clearly accepts her apology not because of her rational argument for peace, but rather because she looks beautiful, submissive, and frail. She is not going to be an equal partner with him in any enterprise; Adam even understands this latest speech as a plea for his "counsel," as if she cannot think for herself. There can be no equality in the world of this poem. The men of Paradise Lost refuse to change, repeating the same mistakes that, in the beginning, caused the Fall.

In a stroke of irony so specific that it must be deliberate, Milton's men—God, the angels, and Adam—return to the exact same faulty system of imparting knowledge that

made them share responsibility for humanity's Fall. Once again, Eve is excluded from all conversations, and Adam takes the job of intermediary. Where before God sent Raphael to warn Adam about the snake in the garden, God now sends Michael to explain to Adam the future of humanity and the eventual hope of salvation. Eve's exclusion from this conversation is especially counterintuitive, since the language continually underscores her importance to salvation. In fact, the text places emphasis on "the woman" above Adam. God calls it "my cov'nant in the woman's seed renew'd," Michael greets Eve with the title "Mother of all things living," and even Adam finally admits "Now clear I understand / what oft my steadiest thoughts have searcht in vain, / why our great expectation should be call'd / the seed of Woman" (XI.116, 160; XIII.376-79). However, despite Eve's recognized importance, Michael puts her into a drugged sleep while he teaches Adam how to "lead / safest thy life" (XI.364-65). There is no logical reason to exclude Eve from such instruction. She is not even given the choice to listen, as she was before. Instead, she is forcefully—and bafflingly—removed from the learning experience.

As long as this insistence upon irrational gender roles and hierarchy remains, there can be none of the reciprocity that Milton used to describe functional marriages in his other writing. If "Milton redefined marriage in language of thorough mutuality as 'meet and happy conversation' in 'conjugall fellowship' with 'a fit conversing soul'" in the Divorce Tracts, then Eve's position creates a dysfunctional partnership (McColley 155). She is kept from being "a fit conversing soul," through repeated exclusion from information. The language of Paradise Lost hints at this barrier between Adam and Eve; even as the poem says that partnership, marriage, and the promise of offspring are all the

comfort the two take with them away from Eden, there is evidence that something is missing.⁶ The strictly imposed hierarchy continues to force a rift between them, even into the final lines of the poem. The conclusion of Michael's speech makes the situation clear.

He tells Adam:

Go, waken Eve;
 Her also I with gentle Dreams have calm'd
 Portending good, and all her spirits compos'd
 To meek submission: thou at season fit
 Let her with thee partake what thou hast heard,
 Chiefly what may concern her Faith to know,
 The great deliverance by her Seed to come
 (For by the Woman's Seed) on all Mankind,
 That ye may live, which will be many days,
 Both in one Faith unanimous though sad,
 With cause for evils past, yet much more cheer'd
 With meditation on the happy end. (XII.594-605)

Michael not only excludes Eve from the information he gives to Adam, but he also encourages Adam to censor what he passes on to her, and when. Michael's chooses words very specifically—Adam is only to pass on “what may concern her Faith to know.” He emphasizes that Eve's faith is different, and seemingly lesser, than Adam's because she must receive different information from a mediating source. Yet a few lines later, Michael contradicts himself when he says “that ye may live...both in one Faith unanimous.” It cannot be both ways; either Eve has a different “faith,” one that requires

less attention than Adam's, or they are "unanimous." They cannot be a strong united front and divided along gender lines too. However, the division and the inherent hierarchy of God—Adam—Eve remain to the end of the book. The closing lines of the poem read:

The World was all before them, where to choose
 Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
 They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
 Through *Eden* took thir solitary way. (XII.646-49)

This couple may be "hand in hand," but the final emphasis is on "thir solitary way." The choice of the word "solitary" drives home a sense of loneliness and separation, while its incongruous juxtaposition with the image of "hand in hand" underscores the continually changing image of Eve, and her place, throughout the poem. And her final place, it seems, is still below Adam in a dysfunctional hierarchy that has already caused one life-changing disaster.

Milton's epic poem portrays a patriarchal society built on gender-defined binaries, identifies a flaw within the structure, and yet never offers a solution. At the same time, the text will not even commit to one reading of Eve; is she a power-hungry pariah who knowingly sinned, or is there evidence that she was tricked, coerced, and aided in the Fall? *Paradise Lost* never decides, choosing instead to end on yet another contradiction. At least the predominately "conventional view of gender" that appears in the poem "is destabilized by elements of Milton's imaginative vision that invite a more egalitarian conception: if Milton could not work fully through such conflicts, he did provide liberalizing perspectives upon which some later feminists could and did build" (Lewalski 480). The breakdown of binaries within the text creates room for more ambiguous,

forgiving, almost-feminist readings of Eve. Jackie DiSalvo describes the way Milton's writing often deconstructs. She says, "Milton, marvelously, always contradicts himself, always, that is, gives us the whole contradiction and not just his preferred stance on it, and so...threatens to subvert his own male supremacist views" (212-13).

This refusal to commit to one reading of woman is also very epic in nature. The genre itself is circular and open-ended, searching for closure or *telos*, just like the human experience it echoes. Philip Hardie explains epic's concerns in this way: "Epic attempts to construct a comprehensive and orderly model of the world, but it turns out that such models are inherently unstable" (Hardie 3). Epic cannot find closure, and in this same way, Milton cannot find one characterization of Eve that can encompass all her qualities. The way Paradise Lost ends without fixing the gender problem, or even offering a solution, is simply the only way the poem can end, both as an epic and a text written by Milton. Perhaps McColley says it best; "The 'woman question' in Milton will never be *decided*," she says. "Good poems never end" (163-4). Perhaps this is why attempts to label Milton and Paradise Lost as misogynist or feminist are often rebutted—the question cannot be decided. Even the author did not decide.

¹ In more recent decades, feminist readings of Milton's work tend to place him in a new category, one that falls between the two extremes of misogyny and feminism. Applying "feminist thinking to Milton is ahistorical," and yet his texts refuse to completely demonize women (Halley 230). Thus he is generally categorized as "masculinist"—"not a misogynist" but "locked into his culture's assumptions of woman's inferior position in the human paradigm" (Woods 16). This term has been applied to Milton by John Shawcross, Mary Nyquist, and Diane McColley among others.

² David Quint addresses the different concerns of two characters who embody typical females of epic—the dangerous woman, and the wife / mother. These woman, Dido and Andromache, appear in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Dido characterizes the stereotypical female preoccupation with love, passion, and marriage. Quint demonstrates how this female stereotype causes problems, saying "Most notoriously, [Aeneas] infuriates the love-stricken Dido in Book 4 by telling her that, did his destiny not call him to Italy and were he free to choose, he would—and at this point Dido and the reader certainly expect him to say that he would remain beside her in Carthage—instead return to rebuild Troy" (Quint 58). When Aeneas departs from the "expected" response that the woman desires, she turns to violence, sorcery, and suicide. With this story, it appears that the epic roles of men and women are not only traditionally opposite, but also the woman is occasionally aligned with danger, seduction, and destruction. Not so with Andromache. However, she still epitomizes female interests in that all "her questions and her concern" when she speaks to Aeneas is "for the surviving *child* who carries on the family line" (Quint 59, emphasis mine).

³ Many scholars who read these lines about Eve see the obvious connection between Eve and Narcissus. In Ovid's version of Narcissus's tale, the beautiful young man becomes obsessed with his own reflection, refusing to leave until he starves. In effect, beauty is what kills him. It is identified as a dangerous, uncontrollable asset. The similarities between Narcissus and Eve carry this definition of beauty with them, tagging Eve as a potential threat to stability—and perhaps continued life—in a Narcissus-like way. Ovid tells his story:

There was a pond, a small but perfect body of water
way off in a distant part of the wood,
.....To this unearthly spot
Narcissus came one day, hot from the chase and tired,
and with an enormous thirst, which he knelt down to slake...
but another thirst is born, an impossible longing for what he sees
reflected in the water's surface. That face, that body,
he adores, loves, yearns for with all his heart. He is smitten
utterly, and he feels what the goddess has in her justice
visited upon him to feel.....
.....He lowers his head
and tries to kiss the face, reaches his hands to embrace
the elusive other, the self, the object to which he is subject
forever. It shimmers away, coy, elusive, mocking...
as he has mocked so many, so often. He cannot desist,
cannot resist. He is crazed, knows it, and tells himself:
"Get up, turn away, forget it. What you seek, you have. It's merely
an image, nothing. The face you see in the pond will be gone
the moment you leave...." (III.407-08, 411-18, 427-35)

However, unlike Eve, Narcissus is not won over by reasoned arguments. He stays until "His head drooped like a flower, and death at last sealed those eyes / that had undone him or been undone by their owner's beauty." (III.499-500). This draws a distinction between Narcissus and Eve; she actually responds to logical calls to leave the water. Eve overcomes the character defects, such as vanity, that undo Narcissus, ending her story on a decidedly positive note. The text goes to lengths to disprove the very accusation it casts upon Eve by placing her by the pool to begin with. However, the concept of beauty as dangerous and unknown stays with the poem.

⁴ Another example of Eve using reason comes after the serpent makes his offer. Upon hearing his logical lies, Eve reasons aloud:

In the day we eat
Of this fair Fruit, our doom is, we shall die.
How dies the Serpent? hee hath eat'n and lives,
And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns,
Irrational till then. For us alone
Was death invented? or to us deni'd
This intellectual food, for beasts reserv'd? (IX.762-68)

She is able to rationalize an explanation that makes sense; if the fruit causes death but the snake is alive, there must be an exception to the rule. Eve reaches her explanation ("this intellectual food, for beasts

reserv'd") on her own, through a logical process. In a way, the snake's appeal to her reason convinces her, and it also works to disprove prior accusations that Eve is incapable of mental cogitation. Yes, her reasoning reaches a faulty conclusion, but not because of a defect in her mind. Rather, misinformation causes Eve to conclude the fruit is safe.

⁵ The quote continues:

But for thee
 I had persisted happy, had not thy pride
 And wand'ring vanity, when least was safe,
 Rejected my forewarning.....
 But with the Serpent meeting
 Fool'd and beguil'd by him thou, I by thee
 To trust thee from my side, imagin'd wise,
 Constant, mature, proof against all assaults,
 And understood not all was but a show
 Rather than solid virtue. (X.872-84)

In this tirade, Adam incriminates himself by making excuses that contradict things he said before the Fall. At this moment of anger and finger-pointing, Adam claims he "imagin'd [Eve was] wise." However, earlier in the poem he described her as "of Nature...th' inferior, in the mind / and inward Faculties, which most excel" (VIII.541-42). He will only give Eve the benefit of wisdom after the fact, and only to say he "imagin'd" her "wise," even when he did no such thing. This is a harsh example of the way Eve is continually denied status as a rational, logical being.

⁶ Adam and Eve may need each other, and they may return to a state of union, but they do not necessarily find *unity*, and their re-established marriage in the final books of the poem is not synonymous with equality. Mary Nyquist explores the feminist desire to equate the marriage with equality. She says:

Because much academic criticism on Paradise Lost...has been written within a liberal-humanist tradition that wants Milton to be, among other things, the patron saint of the companionate marriage, it has frequently made use of a notion of equality that is both mystified and mystifying. The undeniable emphasis on mutuality to be found in Paradise Lost—the mutual dependency of Eve and Adam on one another, their shared responsibility for the Fall—is for this reason often treated as if it somehow entailed a significant form of equality. (165)

However, such a pat definition of their marriage—equality—is a misreading that simplifies the text too much and ignores the signs of dysfunction that exist throughout the entire poem.

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