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JANE EYRE—A DAUGHTER OF THE LADY IN MILTON'S COMUS

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Charlotte Brönte's Jane Eyre, a canonical text for feminists, 1 empowers its heroine to transcend social limitations and achieve full independence. While twentieth-century critics often focus on the evolution of Jane's personality, i.e., psychological concerns such as her emotional growth, her sexual maturation, and her experiential development, 2 they largely overlook the religious convictions structuring her thinking. Despite her social non-conformity, her will to prevail through difficult circumstances is ultimately driven by a traditional idea of religious duty, important both to the greater nineteenth century and to Charlotte Brönte, daughter of a clergyman. The centrality of Brönte's, and Jane's, faith requires a critical reexamination of the novel's religious agenda.

Affirming the religious core of her art, Brönte invokes John Milton as a literary spokesman of Christian duty. Biographers Elizabeth Gaskell and Winifred Gerin vouch that Brönte revered Milton as England's foremost poet and recommended his works to Emily, even before Shakespeare's.³ Others have noted a direct influence in *Jane* Evre from several Miltonic works: Robert Martin discusses Rochester's similarities to Milton's Samson, and Alan Bacon links Jane's paintings to key passages in Paradise Lost. 4 Brönte even cites Milton in Jane Eyre when she names Samson Agonistes in describing Rochester and again in Shirley when the title character compares her vision of Eve to Milton's.⁵ Inspired by his works, Brönte infuses the novel with his imagery and reemploys his themes celebrating the infinite capacity of the human spirit and strength of free will. Recognition of the Miltonic posture of Jane Evre must alter the perception of the novel by restoring the primacy of its religious considerations.

Milton's most courageous heroine, the Lady in A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, habitually referred to as Comus, offers a prototype for Jane Eyre, who re-enacts the theme of triumph amidst spiritual trials. Lost in a wooded dell, Milton's Lady alone faces the demonseducer Comus, sustains through faith and resolution a chastity of mind and body, and defies the attempted tyranny of the seducer. Like Milton's allegorical Lady, Jane Eyre encounters a tempter in Rochester who similarly tests her strength of will and purity of spirit. Also

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without aid from family or friends, Jane withstands Rochester's onslaught to divert her to his own purposes, overriding her values. In a pervasive way, *Jane Eyre* echoes *Comus*—in its theme of temptation, its climax emphasizing the form of resistance, and its denouement celebrating spiritual triumph.

Jane's character rests on an ideal of moral excellence identical to Milton's broad conception of chastity which is personified in the Lady. Their chastity represents an insistence upon pristine truth formed according to ethical standards which cannot be adjusted to fit time, place, or circumstance—marriage vows are sacred to Jane in the same way that the Lady's virginity represents virtue to her. Exactly as the Lady lives by "sober laws" of unfallen, "innocent nature," Jane pledges obedience to divine laws: "I will keep the law given me by God...Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation..." (p. 404). Absolute allegiance to timeless values of truth to God and self is the crux of Jane's and the Lady's achievements. Recasting a recurrent figure in Milton's poetry—the single, uncorrupted, chaste spirit among the throngs of fallen humanity—Jane Eyre serves as an example to the multitude.

Lacking this form of chastity which characterizes the heroines, Comus and Rochester serve not only as their tempters but also as their foils. In imagery similar to that detailing Satan in Paradise Lost, Comus is the "damn'd magician" (1. 602), the "foul deceiver" (1. 696), who represents "visor'd falsehood" (1. 696) and "glozing courtesy" (1. 161). Rochester, also a demonic figure, confesses to Jane more than once that he is the "very devil" (pp. 328, 368), and when Jane meets Bertha Mason, Rochester tells her that she is peering "at the mouth of hell...at the gambols of a demon" (p. 371). Although Rochester is referring to Bertha's malevolence, a second meaning implicates Rochester himself, who has the demonic "falcon-eye" (p. 343). Because of their spiritual shortcomings, both men are drawn to their heroines' divine essences. When Comus first sees the Lady, he speaks of her with awe: "Can any mortal mixture of Earth's mold / Breathe such Divine enchanting ravishment? / Sure something holy lodges in that breast...."I'll speak to her / And she shall be my Queen" (ll. 244-65). With equal urgency, Rochester desires through Jane to be "healed and cleansed, with an angel as [his] comforter," as he entreats her, "to the soul made of fire,...I am ever tender and true" (p. 328). Camouflaged in sensual expressions, their appeals nevertheless reveal the hollowness of Comus's and Rochester's spiritual existence.

In contrast to the intangible, inner strength of character which the women possess, the power of their tempters rests in external, temporal

props—their material wealth, social and political vantage (Comus's leadership of the "herd"), and physical dominance. Both Comus and Rochester tantalize their heroines with luxurious gifts and physical pleasures which, the seducers argue, mortals should relish as their appetites dictate: jewels, silks, wealth, social position, and other sensuous delights. They advocate a selfish doctrine of use which the Lady terms "lewdly-pampered Luxury...swinish gluttony" (Il. 770-76) and which causes Jane to feel like "an ape in a harlequin's jacket—a jay in borrowed plumes" when Rochester decorates her with his finery, his "patent of nobility" (p. 326). Rather than luring the heroines, Comus's and Rochester's vain devotion to wealth and luxury evokes only feelings of degradation and disgust from them.

In their demonic, twisted reasoning, Comus and Rochester pervert the sense of the Lady's and Jane's chastity by reducing its scope to the narrow meaning of sexual abstinence. Repeatedly, Comus attacks the Lady's "doctrine of Virginity" (1. 787), her "lean and sallow Abstinence" (1. 709), and her "waste fertility" (1. 729):

List Lady, be not coy, and be not cozen'd With that same vaunted name Virginity; Beauty is nature's coin, must not be hoarded, But must be current, and good thereof Consists in mutual and partak'n bliss....

(11. 737-41)

Like Comus, Rochester acts upon sexual impulse as he too disparages Jane for her denial of physical affection: "...you have refused to kiss me....you will say,—'That man had nearly made me his mistress: I must be ice and rock to him;' and ice and rock you will accordingly become" (pp. 382-83). Neither Comus nor Rochester comprehends the dictates of the the Lady's and Jane's principled consciences. Rochester confesses that his "principles were never trained...[and] may have grown a little awry for want of attention" (p. 331) and distorts the truth to answer to his passion: "[Jane] must become a part of me....it is all right; you shall yet be my wife: I am not married" (p. 387). Ultimately, Rochester's flaw repeats that of Comus—his values lack a spiritual foundation, and his allegiance to principles has been traded too easily for gratification. In other words, both have abandoned chastity for other prizes.

When seduction using material or physical enticements fails, Comus and Rochester attempt to constrain the heroines. Determined to possess the Lady, Comus literally imprisons her in his cave. Rochester

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also attempts to rule Jane and even bind her to him, to "attach her to a chain" (p. 341) or "twine her around [his] finger" (p. 328). Images of bondage intensify and increase in frequency with his frustration at his inability to capture the inner Jane. In the culmination of his failed attempts to control her, Rochester traps Jane on their wedding morning with a "grasp of iron" (p. 363). But finally Rochester must lament that physical power has no hold on Jane's spiritual core: "Never...never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable" (p. 405).

Cast opposite bold and possessive seducers, the heroines thwart the power of their tempters and uphold valued principles. In spite of imprisonment, both proclaim their liberty of mind, their inner freedom. Physical imprisonment, then, only casts in relief the indestructible independence of the virtuous soul.

Jane's thoughts and emotions repeat mental processes of the Lady sustaining chastity; likenesses coalesce in recast imagery and phraseology derived from the masque. As the prototype, Milton's Lady first masters insidious lower faculties of the mind—fancy and imagination—in order to resist seduction and remain chaste. When lost in the wood, the Lady momentarily gives way to fanciful doubt:

A thousand fantasies

Begin to throng into my memory, Of calling shapes and beck'ning shadows dire, And airy tongues that syllable men's names On Sands and Shores and desert Wildernesses. These thoughts may startle well, but not astound The virtuous mind.... (Il. 205-10)

She exerts her free will and clears her mind of these thoughts. In this initial step, she confronts and controls fancy and imagination which, in Milton's view, can dissolve the mediating salve of human reason by allowing evil into the mind through the senses.

Jane, too, is threatened by fear and passion which produce "withering dread" (p. 285) and "delirium" (p. 188), the "washy draught of feeling" ungoverned by judgment. Jane's words, "I had no time to nurse chimeras" (p. 205) echo the warning in *Comus* against "dire chimeras and enchanted Isles" (l. 517). Conscious of the potential dominance of passion over reason in her psyche, she, too, wills to rise above it; she brings back thoughts "straying through imagination's boundless and trackless waste, into the safe fold of common sense" (p. 200). Like the Lady's "desert wilderness," Jane's "boundless and trackless waste" of ungoverned thought threatens her but does not overwhelm her.

A trait which characterizes Milton's Christian heroes, "Right Reason" shapes Jane's thoughts and actions. Just as the Lady asserts that Comus cannot "charm my judgment as mine eyes, / Obtruding false rules prankt in reason's garb" (Il. 757-58), Jane declares that "reason sits firm and holds the reins" (p. 252). A faculty which likens mortals to angels, Right Reason resembles the governing force of conscience, but it also assumes unequivocally an extension of the hand of God. Robert Martin discusses Jane's vacillation between reason and passion as mere workings of the human psyche, but Jane's power of reason is reinforced by Providence. Whereas the Lady knows she has Right Reason, Jane doubts this and often pleads for increased power of reason, which manifests itself as inward vision or inner light: Jane's "bright vision" reproduces the Lady's inner "radiant light" and places divine strength within her.

The heroines face a symbolic threat to Right Reason in the sinister darkness which accompanies their first meetings with Comus and Rochester. Just as the forest's darkness blinds the Lady as Comus draws near, Rochester's black silhouette blinds Jane when he first appears before her on the path to Thornfield: "drawn in dark and strong on the foreground, [he] efface[s] the aerial distance of azure hill, sunny horizon, and blended clouds..." (p. 135). Jane later adds, "He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun (p. 346). Aside from its direct association with evil, darkness in Miltonic terms represents the dim disordered matter of chaos untouched by the Creator and, more important, its parallel in the disordered human mind uncontrolled by reason. Therefore, the Lady's "double night of darkness" in "chaos" (ll. 334-35), as well as Jane's dark "abyss" (p. 168), represents those uncontrolled passions which can undermine judgment, or Right Reason.

In Comus and Jane Eyre alike, the gift of illumination symbolically guides each heroine to spiritual sources and imbues her with grace. Celestial light in Milton's poetry manifests God himself: like the "Sun-clad power of Chastity" (1. 782) in Comus, God appears "unfolding bright" in Paradise Lost.⁸ The virtuous woman must simply bathe in that light to immerse herself in His grace. Lost in the dark wood, the Lady invokes spiritual aid in order to see the "Supreme good" (1. 217) and immediately, "a sable cloud / Turn[s] forth her silver lining on the night, / And casts a gleam over this tufted Grove" (1l. 223-25). She then visualizes "enlivened spirits" of Faith, Hope, and Chastity which "prompt her" from fear (1. 225) and spur her to act by calling for her brothers. Like a disciple of the Lady, Jane looks to the

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ceiling of her bedroom at that darkest moment when she must leave Rochester and envisions the gleam of the moon:

She [the moon] broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke, to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart.... (p. 407)

Invoking this light, Jane, too, receives instruction to act virtuously during her ultimate trial, the painful rejection of Rochester's offer: the moon-vision tells her, "My daughter, flee temptation!" (p. 407). In images nearly identical in *Comus* and *Jane Eyre*, the sable folds of cloud part to reveal a spirit which, in the form of light, merges with the heroine and guides her.

Deliverance from darkness by the sun, stars, and moon pervades both works, giving these women a seemingly personal lighted vision of virtue. The Elder Brother explains the significance of the Lady's inner light:

Virtue could see to do what virtue would By her own radiant light....
He that has light within his own clear breast May sit i'th' center, and enjoy bright day, But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts Benighted walks under the midday Sun; Himself is his own dungeon. (Il. 373-85)

The Lady's light within the breast, like Jane's moon-gleam within the heart, is God's spirit within woman/man.

Jane's frequent prayers for the "power of vision" in her "mind's eye" (p. 132) are often answered with light-emblems of Providence. Reminiscent of Uriel, who travels via sunbeam in *Paradise Lost*, Jane finds herself encased in "fostering sunbeams" (p. 234). After the resplendent night-vision tells her to leave Thomfield, a glowing beacon on the dark moors leads her to family at Marsh End. With Jane's final confidence in the supernal powers of the mind, Brönte's art defends Milton's concept of a divinely inspired human reason.

In order to receive celestial light, the Lady must distinguish it from a demonic false light, the ignis fatuus, associated with Comus. He entices the Lady with a "purer fire" (l. 111), which is ironically sensual

rather than celestial, and revels in his capacity to deceive when he proclaims, "[We] Imitate the starry choir" (l. 112). Also, Comus applauds and emulates another will-o-the-wisp figure Charybdis (ll. 259-61), who lulls victims to madness in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet the Lady distinguishes God's light from that of the deceiver when she miraculously visualizes the radiant spirit figures of Faith, Hope, and Chastity (ll. 213-16).

Jane, too, must recognize the ignis fatuus, which initially surfaces as her own obsessive passion leading "into miry wilds whence there is no extrication" (p. 201). Later, Rochester's confession to Jane concerning his past debaucheries explicitly links him to the ignis fatuus: "I transformed myself into a will-o'-the-wisp. Where did I go? I pursued wanderings as wild as those of the Marsh-spirit. I sought the Continent, and went devious through all its lands....I have deceived you" (pp. 395-96). Temporarily misled, Jane trusts in the honor of Rochester's proposal of marriage until the moment she meets his insane wife, just as the Lady trusts that Comus's palace is a humble cottage until she sees it. Jane faces deceptions symbolically linked to dangers which the Lady encounters. As fancy threatens reason, the ignis fatuus threatens to distract from the true light.

But the heroines' clarity of vision ensures their discernment of truth. When Comus offers the Lady his magical balm, she affirms, "Twill not restore the truth and honesty / That thou hast banished from thy tongue with lies" (II. 690-91). She declines his offered drink knowing that "only good men can give good things" (I. 702). Jane mirrors these thoughts when she recalls, "The attribute of stainless truth was gone from his [Rochester's] idea; and from his presence I must go: that I perceived well" (p. 374). Both heroines recognize that sin has darkened the hearts of Comus and Rochester.

In detail as well as in grand conception, Jane Eyre echoes Comus. Spirit symbols in Jane Eyre correlate to those which harbor and guide the Lady in Comus. Supernatural figures—the Attendant Spirit, the "rapt spirits" of Faith, Hope, and Chastity, and Sabrina—act as God's emissaries in the masque; they warn the Lady of danger, instill faith, offer hope, and finally set her free. Similarly, Jane is protected by mysterious forces which direct her and buoy her at vulnerable moments: visible spirit countenances, whispers of the wind, and dream-visions. Despite the common Romantic, pantheistic interpretations of these prophetic manifestations of nature, Jane's spirit guides symbolize traditional Christian concepts of grace. Before Jane leaves Gateshead, Bessie heeds the divine origin of Jane's supernatural guides in a ballad she sings to the child:

My feet they are sore, and my limbs they are weary; Long is the way, and the mountains are wild; Soon will the twilight close moonless and dreary Over the path of the poor orphan child.

Why did they send me so far and so lonely, Up where the moors spread and grey rocks are piled? Men are hard-hearted, and kind angels only Watch o'er the steps of a poor orphan child.

Yet distant and soft the night-breeze is blowing, Clouds there are none, and clear stars beam mild; God, in His mercy, protection is showing, Comfort and hope to the poor orphan child.

Ev'n should I fall, o'er the broken bridge passing, Or stray in the marshes, by false lights beguiled, Still will my Father, with promise and blessing, Take to His bosom the poor orphan child.

There is a thought that for strength should avail me, Though both of shelter and kindred despoiled: Heaven is a home, and a rest will not fail me; God is a friend to the poor orphan child. (p. 21)

Bessie's prophetic ballad merges natural images of moon, stars, sky, and breeze with Christian concepts of angelic guidance, divine mercy, eternal rest, and Providential protection: the ballad places the novel's supernatural elements within a Christian context.

Furthermore, Bessie's ballad duplicates ideas expressed in Milton's invocation for the Lady's divine protection:

Unmuffle ye faint stars, and thou fair Moon That wont'st to love the traveller's benison, Stoop thy pale visage through an amber cloud... Or if your influence be quite damm'd up With black usurping mists, some gentle taper, Though a rush Candle from the wicker hole Of some clay habitation, visit us With thy long levell'd rule of streaming light And thou shalt be our star of Arcady Or Tyrian Cynosure. (Il. 331-42)

But the "strength of Heaven" (l. 317) represented here by stars and moon remains only an adjunct to the Lady's own "hidden strength" (l. 419), her chastity. Also self-determined, Jane explains the intervention of mysterious spirits as "a sense of influence, which supported me" (p. 386), clearly relegating them to an important but nevertheless auxiliary position. For both women, the spirit guides represent God's freely offered grace, but only for those who freely choose it. With these spirit symbols, Brönte corroborates Milton's view of a loving God who offers aid but does not override human free will.

Jane's Christian grace is also confirmed by her instinctive wisdom, the highest faculty of mind in Milton's scheme—it marks the angels in Paradise Lost and thus signals Jane's elevated spiritual status. Rochester questions her divine instinct and, at the same time, attempts to undercut it: "By what instinct do you [Jane] pretend to distinguish between a fallen seraph of the abyss and a messenger from the eternal throne—between a guide and a seducer" (p. 168). Jane embodies the Miltonic concept of sufficient grace afforded to the chaste soul; she can assuredly—if sadly—withstand any temptation presented to her. Rochester realizes her bulwark of strength as he parrots her thoughts back to her: "I [Jane] need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure, born with me...if all extraneous delights should be withheld; or offered at a price I cannot afford to give..." (p. 252). Jane's "inward treasure" and "unpolluted memory," (p. 166) like the Lady's "unpolluted temple of the mind" (l. 461) and "unblench't majesty" (1, 430), give her immunity to the persuasions of tempters. Her source of wisdom cannot be eroded by Rochester, or any mortal.

To achieve a triumph like the Lady's, Jane overcomes frailties of mind, uses Right Reason, and employs spiritual aid. A Miltonic Christian hero, she asserts her moral superiority through an essentially passive but steadfast stand against evil, rather than in aggressively heroic acts. Jane refuses to blindly follow others, but neither must she ostentatiously lead. She follows a precept enunciated in Raphael's admonition in *Paradise Lost* to be "lowly wise" (VIII, 1. 173) and triumphs in her resolution, "There I plant my foot" (p. 405).

The final note in both *Comus* and *Jane Eyre* celebrates the freedom of the chaste. The women win for themselves independence of the soul from domination of others, whether demon-lovers or nineteenth-century paramours, and assure their greater freedom to sustain spiritual lives. Their brand of liberty transcends the issues of social equality or political rights commonly associated with independence: theirs is trust in one's own values and free conscience before God. Sabrina, the Lady's rescuer, concludes the masque: "Mortals that would follow me, / Love virtue,

she alone is free" (II. 1018-19). Jane finally claims the liberty of mind which she has sought. Indeed, the Lady's words—"Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind" (I. 664)—could have been spoken by Jane.

Both heroines personify the independent thought and action consciously sought by twentieth-century women. The Lady, an allegorical abstraction of these traits, offers an empowering archetype realized in Jane as an exemplum for feminists. Jane enunciates what Adrienne Rich terms "Brönte's feminist manifesto":9

It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity [sic]: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrowed-minded in their more privileged follow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (pp. 132-33)

Therefore, Brönte's utilization of Milton's heroic woman as a model for her feminist paradigm calls into question the notion of Milton as an arch-sexist developed by traditional male critics and perpetuated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic.* ¹⁰

Recently, Joseph Wittreich has in *Feminist Milton* argued for a revision of feminist criticism's standard portrait of Milton as an arch sexist. Milton grants women strength, independence, and responsibility, not only in *Comus* but also in *Paradise Lost*. Certainly Eve, who confronts her own guilt, overcomes weakness, and creates a new life, ultimately achieves a triumph of her own. 12 In allowing the sexes equal latitude for action and assigning equal obligation for its execution, Milton creates in a religious context a well-spring for Brönte's inherent feminism: she implicitly formulates ideals of feminism, working from principles of Christianity in Milton—integrity, dignity, spirituality, strength, will, determination, and, of course, duty.

The Miltonic elements of the novel render the twentieth-century attention sheer personality in Jane Eyre an ahistorical and therefore inadequate critical focus. Jane embodies a spiritual chastity not confined to the human psyche; she strives for Right Reason not attainable through the intellect alone. Like the Lady, she both asserts her human will and accepts God's grace in order to achieve moral excellence and true independence. Abandoning the patriarchal trappings of Christianity to concentrate on its essence, Brönte claims a legacy from Milton's Lady and wills it to twentieth-century women.

NOTES

¹See Adrienne Rich, "Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman," On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York, 1979), pp. 89-106; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," "Race," Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, 1986), pp. 262-80.

²For representative critical views, see Robert Bernard Martin, "Jane Eyre," The Accents of Persuasion (New York, 1966), pp. 57-109; John Maynard, "Sexual Awakening in the Romance World: Jane Eyre," Charlotte Bronte and Sexuality (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 93-145; and Kathleen Tillotson, "Jane Eyre," Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford, 1956), pp. 257-313.

³Elizabeth C. Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Bronte, 1857, (Oxford, 1919), p. 104; Winifred Gerin, Charlotte Bronte: The Evolution of Genius (London, 1967), p. 89; also noted in Christopher Hill, Milton and the English Revolution (Harmondsword, England, 1979), p. 140.

⁴Martin, pp. 96-100; Alan Bacon, "Jane Eyre's Paintings and Milton's *Paradise Lost*," N&Q 229 (1981), pp. 64-65.

⁵Jane Eyre, 1847, eds. Jane, Jack, and Margaret Smith, (Oxford, 1969), p. 552; also noted in Martin, p. 98. Subsequent quotations from Jane Eyre are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose (Indianapolis, 1957), pp. 89-114, ll. 762-68. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷Martin, pp. 57-109.

⁸John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Hughes, pp. 211-469, X, 1. 63. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

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⁹Rich, p. 97.

¹⁰Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "How Are We Fal'n?: Milton's Daughters," The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven, 1979), pp. 187-308.

¹¹Feminist Milton (Ithica, 1987).

¹²See Diane Kelsey McColley, Milton's Eve (Urbana, 1983).