

“Another Skie”: Eve’s Eden and Feminine Cosmologies

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I hope to engage materialism at its most radical and come to recognize as precious the boundedness *of my flesh as part of the world...*

Species are relationships between species—relationality is worldhood.

-Eva Hayward, *More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves*

In book 4 of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Eve recounts her first moments of waking.¹ She hears the murmur of a stream as it comes forth from a cave and, following the sound, is led to a “liquid Plain” (4.454) that when looked into, looks back. The “Shape within the watry gleam” (4.461) gazes at her with “looks Of sympathie and love” (4.464-5). Eve wakes into an Eden of interconnected bliss. She is one shape among many like-shapes in the world around her, as her gaze is doubled and matched in liquid form. The cave is an earthly reflection of her physical, sexual “difference,” and her “Guide and Head” (4.442) Adam is made from the material she is molded from. Or, at least, that’s what we can piece together from her first speech, as the events of the day become tangled and sublimated by the voices of God and her husband above and beside her, rotely repeating her supposed place.

Paradise Lost is Milton’s cosmology based on Genesis, and his “stridently masculinist”² biblical hermeneutics mean that Eve’s experience in the poem gets somewhat lost in the “mazié foulds” (9.161) of Milton’s theological and philosophical intentions. As Mary Nyquist argued in her 1987 article “The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity,” Milton is committed to a scriptural interpretation that adamantly privileges Adam over Eve, and even if readings of his work foreground “egalitarian” heterosexual couplings, they “cannot finally obscure Eve’s secondary status as a ‘gift’ from one patriarch to another.”³ Nyquist expounds how Eve’s creation

establishes a “dialogic relation” between Adam and God in the poem: “In Milton’s exegesis, the significance of the gift—woman—passed from maker to man is determined by two speeches, first the maker’s and then Adam’s, precisely because these speeches are construed as a verbal exchange that is basically contractual.”⁴ Her analysis grounds Adam’s subjectivity in the transaction whereby God provided his “last best gift” Eve, and Adam and God co-author the institution of marriage. Through this agreement, along with Adam’s temporal priority as the first created human, Adam’s becomes *the* subject position in the poem. Sharing a reality with God, Adam represents the “public” sphere in *Paradise Lost*: “paradigmatically masculine, autonomous, articulate, and preternaturally awake to the implications of entering into relations with others.”⁵ For Nyquist, opposite the masculinist public where Adam, God and the angels share conversation and language, Eve occupies a feminine, “private,” solipsistic realm, unmoored from scripture and lyrical in nature. In this way, Eve’s interiority is a way for Milton to showcase how well God met Adam’s need—Eve is truly a fit partner, which readers understand from her clear subjectivation.⁶ What makes Eve’s realm private and feminine is Eve’s “false” reading of her situation in Eden: she infers from her visits to the pool that she is in an “uninhabited autonomous” world, but in reality, her world is “constituted and interconnected with the ‘public’ world around it.”⁷ For Nyquist, Eve’s subjectivity is made feminine through the quality of its “illusory” autonomy, when “really,” Eve is fully embedded in a masculinist Symbolic.⁸

While Nyquist’s understanding of the first couple’s subjectivity is a helpful foundation to consider, I disagree that Eve’s recognition of Eden is a way for Milton to construct the feminine as defined by the masculine. Rather, in what follows, I heed Melissa Sanchez’s recent proposal that “Milton’s writing is valuable to queer and trans studies”⁹—and queer and trans feminisms—

and so take Eve's perspective in order to elaborate her Eden as an alternative, (feminine) public outside of masculinist discourse's reach—including Milton's. Recent scholarship on the couple's subjectivity in *Paradise Lost* trends towards highlighting love as an inter/subjective force. This lens does not explicitly draw out the gendered differences of subjective experiences; this may be connected to love's long, historical entanglement within hetero/gender normativity.¹⁰ Ayelet Langer notes how Adam's self-conception as a "subject that persists over change" is grounded in his "capacity for love."¹¹ Karen Edwards, too, understands Eve's gardening practice and the way her plants "gladlier grew" (8.47) at her touch as a way "enlivening...comes from loving intimacy" and remarks that Eve "(perhaps better than Adam) has fully understood the dynamic vitality of learning grounded in love."¹² Joshua Held brings to the fore the "potency of love,"¹³ which unites Adam and Eve after the fall, and cites love as a "deep taproot"—a type of interiority—that gives way to "the interpersonal interactions of the primal human beings."¹⁴ Perhaps because of their underemphasis on gender, these views can have the tendency to reinforce masculinist arguments against Eve. For instance, while not a central part of her analysis, Edwards reproduces the perspective of both God and Satan in the poem by stating that Eve falls because "she has not had enough experience yet to know what experience is."¹⁵ I argue, then, that instead of positioning Eve's reality as a "false" misreading or "fantasy"/feminized space (in Nyquist's terms), or a lack of deployable experience (in Edwards's), the at-times ambiguous and fractured quality of Eve's characterization are cracks through which we can view an alternate "feminine" cosmos of intersubjective materiality—a valid symbolic order, with a different organizing structure than Adam's, who is ruled by God's word. Given that Milton's cosmology based on scripture was not unique in seventeenth century imaginations,¹⁶ I close by exploring ways that Margaret Cavendish's paradise in her prose fiction *The Blazing World* offers

an environment more hospitable to Eve—perhaps just the place for us to make sense of Eve’s subjectivity through Cavendish’s theological and philosophical underpinnings.

Masculinist Discourse and Feminine Difference

Implicit in Nyquist’s reading is the way Milton renders Adam and God’s world as discursive. Linguistic contract, that is, rules both the creation of Eve and the terms of life in Eden. Before Eve’s first speech in *Paradise Lost*, Adam speaks, relating that he comes to the world “as liberal and free as infinite” (4.415). Indeed, God’s hierarchy in the poem makes Adam’s freedom possible and “easie.” Quickly after stating that he is free, he enforces gender hierarchy by relaying that was made from dust, citing the “obviously masculinist Yawhist or ‘J’ creation account in [Genesis] chapter 2, where the creator makes man from the dust of the ground.”¹⁷ Following this, Adam recounts God’s prohibitions breezily as

The only sign of our obedience left
Among so many signes of power and rule
Conferrd upon us, and Dominion giv’n
Over all other Creatures that possess
Earth, Air, and Sea. (4.428-32)

Adam is well situated from the start: he clearly understands and is invested in the system he finds himself within. In comparison to Eve’s, Adam’s speech might be described as a state of flow versus her struggle: Adam’s speech is entirely his own and he quotes no one, rather recounting events with narrative flair—the first couple were not just made from dust but “plac’t...in happiness” (4.416-7), God’s prohibition is not just arbitrary but protection from a “dreadful thing no doubt” (4.426). He linguistically expresses his subjectivity as his narrative glides along in a normative structure with cooperative asides.

Eve's speech contains other speakers within it and touches multiple temporalities—she starts in the current moment, and volleys between now and then, references other moments in her memory, and shifts between what she thought she knew versus what she “knows” now after being corrected. The statement “That day I oft remember” is immediately linked to her curiosity: “much wondring where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how” (4.451-2), signaling that ascertaining her situation did and still does not come easily for her. Through these lines, we understand that there is something worth coming back to for Eve; given that she is less aligned with her surroundings, she must revisit “that day” to make sense of it. Where Adam's speech shows no temporal dissonance—his thought follows a linear narrative—Eve is doubling back and revisiting, both in the memory of the day, in the glimpses of herself, and the language she uses. She opens,

O thou for whom
and from whom I was form'd flesh of thy flesh,
And without whom am to no end, my Guide
And Head. (4.440-3)

Doesn't this sound eerily similar to Adam's reproach of Eve on the day of her arrival? In her speech, Eve recounts Adam's words, which follow God's foremost reproach of her:

return fair *Eve*,
Whom fli'st thou? whom thou fli'st, of him thou art
His flesh, his bone; 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: with that thy gentle hand
Seis'd mine, I yielded, and from that time see
How beauty is excelled by manly grace. (4.482-490)

Eve's opening remarks to Adam—that she is luckier than Adam because she has him, her superior, while he only has her—linguistically mark the yielding she recounts in 4.489. Although she originally found Adam “less faire, Less winning soft, less amiablie mild” (4.478-9) than herself, she now “knows” that “beauty is excelld by manly grace” (4.490) after “yielding.” By focusing on the way Eve's impulses and inclinations for self-actualization are repeatedly corrected by God and Adam linguistically, and finally, through corrective touch (“with that thy gentle hand / Seis'd mine, I yielded”) on the day of her awakening in Eden, we can see that the way Eve begins her speech to Adam—“formed of thy flesh”—is the “corrected” outcome evidently related to her “difference.” Rather than immediately resonating with God's order, Eve has to be disciplined into learning and then repeating God's language and values, and here she repeats this phrase—“from whom I was formd flesh of thy flesh”— which originates from God, passed to her husband (he speaks first, before her) then is repeated by Eve in right order.

By Eve's next speech, she is able to speak the corrected language of God and Adam, and her opening lines to Adam are:

My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst
Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,
God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more
Is womans happiest knowledge and her praise. (4.635-8)

Eve is aware of the link between submitting to Adam and God and her status as “Woman.” Indeed, she recites for God and Adam the discourse she is expected to speak as one who is told she is woman. For in God’s paradigm, Eve was always meant to be the “first of women” (4.409), and this is likely what God has in mind as he reproves her self-interest in the “watry gleam” at the time of her wake, redirecting her to her husband:

him thou shalt enjoy
Inseparable thine, to him shalt beare
Multitudes like thy self, and thence be call'd
Mother of human Race. (4.473-5)

As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes, “woman” in both terminology and subject position has, throughout history, often had an overdetermined relationship with embodied beings—in other words, people are sometimes made to be women through the instrumentalization of their bodies. Prelapsarian Eve is, surprisingly, not reproductive and therefore not yet completely collapsible into her role as the “mother of human race,” as much as God conditions her to think of herself as such. Though she learns and often says the right things, through her speeches and actions, God, the angels, and Adam’s linguistic constraints do not entirely inhibit Eve before the Fall, and there are moments where we can read Eve’s subjectivity pushing back against this limited discursive paradigm she’s constituted by. In this way, Eve is still an amalgamation of subjective states that are too idiosyncratic and ambivalent to be condensed into the masculinist, static subject position of “Woman.” Although her experience is constantly ruptured by Adam, the angels and God’s discourse, I suggest that Eve still has access to her own Eden, with values and terms that differ from the discursive masculinist symbolic order of Milton’s cosmology. Reading Milton through a queer and feminist lens is not new—

Sanchez contextualizes Milton's writing in general, and Eve's waking scene in particular, by reiterating the "homoeroticism" present in Eve's self-love that is oft cited.¹⁸ I depart, however, from this lineage and instead understand Eve through a relationality that displaces the hetero/homo: through intersubjective action like touch, artistry and gardening, Eve's Eden is a feminine cosmos of "sympathie"—even if finding it requires us to read between the lines.

In her second speech, Eve is replying to Adam, who has just outlined the (understandable, of course) reasons why things are how they are—humans and animal sleep patterns, the outcome of human labor, etc. In response, Eve taps into the undifferentiated materiality that she wakes into several stanzas earlier. Again, the difference in style between Adam and Eve's talk is stark: Adam's subject is the supremacy of man over beast and plant and the ontological reasons why they must work and sleep, and Eve's subject, objectively how sweet it is to be with Adam, poetically and subjectively invokes the world around her and its similarities with her body. Like her own breath (and pronouns), she evokes the "breath of morn, her rising sweet" (4.641) and surveys everything she sees—this love poem for Adam is the vehicle in which Eve can express her own "glorious sight" (4.658) and vision. She ends the verse with a mild suggestion that ever so slightly rubs against Adam's complete assurance that all is right: "But wherfore all night long shine these, for whom / This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?" (4.657-8). Perhaps just a general curiosity, but I wonder if Eve's is gently pointing out the subjective experience of sight for the living things she shares the Earth with—while humans sleep, do other beings, too, see these beautiful sights? Eve's preoccupation with the world around her—plants, animals—cracks the solidity of Adam's Eden, for him a place that solely hosts the first couple's experience and, in its right order, is the site and symbol of God's miraculous creation.

There are other moments when Eve's subjecthood appears unexpected, not fully coalesced into her place in God's hierarchy—particularly when she disagrees with or has an alternative perspective than Adam. One exemplary moment is the scene before Eve meets Satan in the garden. Here, Eve clearly has her own view regarding what's important: gardening. She shares her concern with Adam that working together to “Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind” isn't efficient enough, for in just “One night or two...wanton growth derides” (9.210-11) their work. Adam thinks it's cute that Eve is concerned with “how we might best fulfill the work which here / God hath assign'd us” (9.230-1), and believes “nothing lovelier can be found / In Woman, then to studie household good / And good works in her Husband to promote” (9.232-4), but we know from Adam's first speech that he doesn't particularly like gardening per se—he's mostly interested in being with Eve. He says as much to her early on: “to prune these growing Plants, and tend these Flowrs/ which were it toilsom, yet with thee were sweet,” (4.438-9). This is a constitutive difference in perspective and values. This scene becomes an extended back and forth between the two, with Eve employing various rhetorical strategies to get through to Adam in order to do the work the way she sees fit. She asks him: don't you trust me? (“That thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt...I expected not to hear” 9.279-81); what is happiness if we can't go where we want? (“In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe...How are we happie” 9.323-6) and finally, shouldn't God protect us? (“Let us not then suspect our happie State / Left so imperfet by the Maker wise” 9.337-8). “Frustrated by Eve's having used his own words against him,”¹⁹ her apt linguistic performance succeeds and Adam yields; Eve “from her Husbands hand her hand / Soft she withdrew” (9.385-6), marking what an opposite yielding means for Adam—the withdrawal of Eve's touch.

In this example, I don't mean to suggest that Eve is subjectively antagonistic towards God or Adam—Eve's impulses are not positioned against her creators. Diane McColley elaborates how God and Eve are aligned inasmuch as they are both artists, with Eve's realm being poesy—"God as Artifex and his human images as artists...Eve takes at least equal part with Adam, and often takes the lead."²⁰ I concur that Eve's subjectivity is aligned with God's: like God, Eve is good and her creativity stems from the goodness of God's creation and grace. Rather, I suggest that Eve's behavior originates from an alternative phenomenological experience in Eden that is not shared by Adam and thus differently impacts her belief system and activities. Eve is represented as deeply entwined with her environment in a way that Adam is not—her "birth" is elemental and sensory, while at Adam's wake, he feels a "quick instinct" (8.259) and looks "Strait toward Heav'n" where his "wondring Eyes...turn'd, /And gaz'd a while the ample Skie" (8.257-8). Eve too sees the sky upon waking, but it's "another Skie" (4.459)—a duplicate on earth, whereas Adam is straightforwardly connected to God's heaven. For Eve, the vertical structure of hierarchy is harder, if not impossible, to instinctively grasp, and she often intuits what should be up and down hierarchical formations for across, rhizomatic doubles and copies.

This phenomenological difference in experiencing life in Eden drives Eve's subjective preferences for activities that differ from Adam's norms. For Adam, participation in God's world through discourse is the pinnacle: his request to God for Eve is driven by his desire for a conversation partner, and one of the peaks of Adam's life in Eden includes a very long discussion with angel Raphael that spans several books, detailing the creation of all things. When Raphael finishes, Adam is ecstatic—he describes the experience as like "Heav'n / And sweeter thy discourse is to my ear / Then Fruits of Palm-tree" (8.210-12). Here, Adam's experience of

Eden mediated through Raphael's discourse is *sweeter* than the material experience of tasting Eden's bounty—discourse exceeds phenomenology. Parallel to Adam's time with Raphael, Eve's desire was to be

among her Fruits and Flowrs
To vist how they prosper'd, bud and bloom,
Her Nurserie; they at her coming sprung
And toucht by her fair tendance gladlier grew. (8.44-47)

Among the flowers during Adam and Raphael's discourse, Eve also wanted to access Raphael's story through Adam, emphasizing that "Not Words alone pleas'd her" (8.57) but her pleasure included touch, "conjugal Caresses" (8.56). The significance of the repetitive invocation of touch—the flowers touching her, Adam touching her and her touching back and this aiding their growth and being—establishes Eve's preferences and subjective dimensions as uniquely embodied and interconnected with her surroundings, and also divergent from Adam's. The chasm between experience-as-discourse and experience-as-sublimation-into-nature, where hierarchy dissolves, is invoked in the first image of Eve in the poem as well, which shows her as plant-like:

Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dissheveld, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
Subjection. (4.305-8)

John T. Shawcross's gloss in the Doubleday revised edition of the poem elaborates that "'subjection' in this context is a pun, meaning 'both 'being under control' (ironically) and their 'lying beneath.'"²¹ Here we can see that already, the relationship between Eve's subjective

connection to plant-life is in tension with the necessary excess of language—puns and double meanings—which is required to control her natural, undifferentiated state.

Eve's own ability to imagine difference, based on her difference, can be best read in her only scene without Adam—the setting of the Fall. She, again, is presented as part plant. Tending a rosebush, she works to “support /Each Flowr of slender stalk” (9.427-8), the narrative naming her the “fairest unsupported Flowr” (9.432) in the garden. This scene encourages Satan, who wishes to see Eve this way: alone. Satan attributes this to Eve's lower intelligence, which, while the poem may view Eve's phenomenological capacity as inferior, in my reading means she is so enmeshed with the world around her that she doesn't have the “good sense” of hierarchy. In this scene, the first particular way Eve is beguiled is through her interest in a talking snake. This represents, for Eve, the enticing prospect of a horizontal monism: one where fruit, in horizontal relationship with God, may bring unexpected surprises like human speech. While through a masculinist lens this may be construed as lack of foresight or reason, here it signifies how Eve is unattuned to the way hierarchy operates and thus experiences the world differently: we can assume that Adam would have understood the perversion of a speaking animal. Eve's understanding of the organization of cosmos she inhabits departs from Milton's hierarchical monism—as McColley writes, God (and Milton)'s representation of a monist world looks like “a scale of nature rising from plant to animal to man to angel, and of spirit as a superior state.”²² Satan's sentiments about the tree (and, though inference, the tree-like being, Eve)—“O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant” (9.679)—would clearly appear to Adam as incorrect as God gives wisdom, not plants, and Adam knows the proper order of things. Eve, however, potentially part plant herself and acting from an embodied wisdom in relationship with Eden that is less

often reflected in the discursive environment around her, recognizes the possibility in Satan's words in a way that Adam couldn't have access to. So she follows him to the Tree.

In these examples, I have been demonstrating how Eve's subjectivity is unstably connected to womanhood by extrapolating the ways Eve's difference shows up as not necessarily feminized-as-"Woman" yet, but still different from Adam. However, after the Fall, Eve emerges as a figure who is more stable in her gender, inasmuch as gender is a constructed paradigm always already within masculinism. As Jonathan Goldberg argues, "gender is not seamlessly joined...to a history...that mandates difference, in short, a hetero-history."²³ Goldberg places Milton's monism in the context of non-hetero-history in order to trouble ontological categorization of sex-difference as something to be taken for granted, instead reading Milton's materialism via his erotics as "a principle of sameness and difference, of hierarchy and degree within a same."²⁴ It is important to begin here because although dynamics and bodies can be gendered in *Paradise Lost*—and Goldberg sees that Milton's "hierarchy is undeniably one in which Eve is placed lower and further away from God than is Adam"²⁵—gender is one difference among many in this "dynamic" hierarchy and is not necessarily always, or even often, conceptually or materially fixed.

To take Goldberg's point a step further, I propose that we can find gender-as-difference—that is, femininity—signified mainly through hierarchical perversion. This means that femininity emerges in the text in unexpected ways. For instance, Adam's "effeminate slackness" (11.634) is not a result of ontological femininity, but rather the distortion of the hierarchy of God-Angels-Adam-Eve-Animals that he takes part in by obeying Eve over God ("Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey" 10.145). In this way, Eve's relationship with animals is also a signifier of gender difference, because while Adam is properly masculine in his

treatment of animals (to the point where he gets a wife for job well done!)—“among unequals what societie / can sort, what harmonie or true delight?” (8.383-4)—Eve is quickly taken with the idea of talking animals “for in thir looks /Much reason, and in thir actions oft appears” (9.558-9). Even her gardening can be interpreted as hierarchical slippage, for instance in the scene before the Fall, as discussed above, she does not place Adam in his proper rung, preferring the plants and garden’s needs over his. Therefore, where some critics read Milton’s Eve before the Fall as inherently fallen because she is a woman, or ontologically feminine, we can see that her disinvestment from hierarchy, or perhaps just her inherently different approach to it, renders Eve feminine within the masculinist hierarchy of God.

The enmeshment of femininity with hierarchical perversion may be one reason that some critics see Eve in “psychological kinship with Satan,”²⁶ as Satan’s betrayal is at its core the unforgivable hubris of an attempted hierarchical unsettling which renders him ontologically fallen (“Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell” 4.75). Critics have theorized gender and femininity in *Paradise Lost* in several ways. Elspeth Graham reads Satan’s realm as feminized by likening “the dreamlike, hallucinatory nature of Milton’s hell”²⁷ to a “maternal space”²⁸ and identifies Satan in feminized terms: unfixed, hysterical. Graham’s reading contrasts with Kent Lehnhof’s, who in Goldberg’s terms could be described as deeply entrenched in a hetero-historical context that marks sexual difference through essentialized genital notions, reproducing the masculinist (psychoanalytic) paradigm of gender: feminine alterity and phallic lack. His analysis originates from the question of why “Satan is never accused of being effeminate” and resolves it by offering that because “Satan’s desire is narcissistic instead of uxorious, *Paradise Lost* places the adversary outside of the effeminating scenario played out in paradise.”²⁹ John Guillory, accounting for gender difference in *Paradise Lost*, might read Satan’s narcissism as

effeminizing³⁰ given the “association of narcissism with female subjectivity,”³¹ yet Lehnhof strides in a different direction, positing that Adam is susceptible to effeminacy because “Adam’s anatomically authorized masculinity is exceeded by the masculinity of those who perform gender without fixed sexual essences,”³² like Satan. For Lehnhof, “fixed sexual essences” and “maleness”³³ is metonymic for having a penis—to which I respond: I guess he never watched Judith Butler correcting people on YouTube about what gender performativity means. In contrast, my account of gender in *Paradise Lost* posits femininity as situationally emerging, dependent more on the dynamics of hierarchy than embodied actor positions, at least before the Fall.

Said differently, reading femininity in *Paradise Lost* is a unique opportunity because Eve’s subjectivity in Eden before the fall is not in static relationship with an embodied subject. The link between what we call femininity and the overdetermined position of “female” or “Woman,” with a presumed body and behavior, is at times illegible in Eve due to her incompatible expressions of autonomy concurrent with her supposed role. As Ahmed writes, “the category of ‘woman,’ as an over-determined category, is partially fixed into intelligible forms...the general field of discursivity within which woman is articulated cannot be arrested, but remains partially fixed or stabilised by relations of force.”³⁴ Insofar as Milton “was writing at precisely the moment in which modern consciousness was formed—indeed was actively participating in the establishment of new orderings of things,”³⁵ the fissures I explore in this paper show the incongruity between concepts like “Woman” and a stable referent. During the time *Paradise Lost* was written, the idea of “Woman” had not yet completely ossified, which makes tracking femininity and womanhood in this context more negotiable and visible than it becomes later. Reading Eve’s difference as feminine, yet not fixed, in Ahmed’s terms, as

“Woman,” elucidates the dimensions of how the concept of woman becomes “partially fixed,” or even, as I suggest in my reading of Eve-as-nature/Eve-as-plant, broken, from an embodied signified. That said, it is through the force of the masculine symbolic that “Woman” becomes fixed in Milton’s cosmology. This dynamic is epitomized in the last two books as word-for-word scriptural citation takes over the poem; the Bible being, of course, one of the foundational texts of western masculine symbolics.

In contrast to Eve before the Fall, there is one who “seem’[s] Woman” (2.650) in Milton’s cosmos before Eve eats the fruit—Sin. Sin is the shadow representation of what becomes archetypally “Woman”—Eve and Woman, and like Sin in *Paradise Lost*, are both terms which for hundreds of years in a western context are used allegorically.³⁶ We meet Sin in book 2 as the guardian of the gates between Hell and Chaos, her presence a delineating boundary. While Milton doesn’t quite commit to Sin being an actual woman, her appearance designates what “seems” Woman: serpents, childbearing, sexual desire, excess. Sin is the “Snakie Sorceress” (2.724) to the nickname that Adam presents Eve in book 10:

thou Serpent, that name best
Befits thee with him leagu'd, thy self as false
And hateful; nothing wants, but that thy shape,
Like his, and colour Serpentine may shew
Thy inward fraud. (10.867-71)

Along with their shared snakie-ness, linking Sin to womanhood hinges on the poem’s clear interest in Sin’s embodiment—particularly her static relationship with birth, the “hourly conceiv’d / And hourly born” (2.796-7) hellish hound spawn occupying her womb so that, she says, “rest of intermission none I find” (2.802). Eve is similarly collapsed into a birthing body as

she becomes “Woman” in the last two books, as the Fortunate Fall depends on her as foremother first of all, with no intermission in sight. As Adam joyously remarks in book 12:

Why our great expectation should be call'd
The seed of Woman: Virgin Mother, Hail,
High in the love of Heav'n, yet from my Loyns
Thou shalt proceed, and from thy Womb the Son
Of God most High; So God with man unites.
Needs must the Serpent now his capital bruise
Expect with mortal pain: say where and when
Thir fight, what stroke shall bruise the Victors heel. (12.378-85)

Adam is vindicated, and Eve, finally a Woman, loses what subjective particularity she had (we don't get her opinion on childrearing) in order to become a symbol—the instrument through which the history of man and “to God more glory” (12.477) can play out. Leaving Eden, “They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow” (12.648) recalls Eve first speech: “with that thy gentle hand/ Seis'd mine, I yielded.” Here, Eve finally takes her place within the “proper gender hierarchy.”³⁷

Joshua Held highlights how Eve's inner peace after the Fall in book 12 “point[s] ultimately to the “Promis'd Seed” who will restore “all” (12.623)³⁸ but does not consider the enormous implications this newfound redemption has on Eve's gender. He pinpoints the opening lines of Eve's sonnet as Adam returns from visioning with angel Michael: “Whence thou returnst, and whither wentst, I know” (12.610), noting primarily that this “speech is in a different register and form.”³⁹ While I can agree that Milton's use of love poetry is meant to signal “Eve's joy in the couple's newfound consolation,”⁴⁰ this comfort is only possible as Eve moves from

unfixed/in-flux being to defined Woman: from being locked out of knowing “where / And what I was, whence thither brought” to inclusion into the patriarchal symbolic: knowing “Whence” Adam was and “wither” he went, having been told the information from God in her dream. In a different account, Shannon Miller argues optimistically that this shift—Eve as legible, patriarchal Woman—reflects the rhetorical climate Milton was writing within—particularly the public pamphlet debates about the roles of women. In “Serpentine Eve,” Miller shows how Milton dramatized the *querelles des femmes* pro- and anti- “feminist” pamphlet debates by “embed[ding]” pro- and anti-woman arguments in Eve and Adam’s speeches throughout *Paradise Lost*; this includes reproducing phrases, terms and concepts verbatim as they were playing out in these pamphlets during seventeenth century England. Miller understands Milton’s “polyvocal” gender representations as a way to “illustrate how hierarchy is accomplished through a cultural rehearsal of tropes,”⁴¹ thereby suggesting both that egalitarian reading of Milton that Nyquist foretells, and proposing a potentially critical deployment of masculinist arguments by Milton. These critics mark two ways to give Eve her due as an autonomous person, especially as Miller links the “Eve who justifies her fault” after the Fall to her use of “both the terms of and the strategies of”⁴² feminists writing at the time, including Rachel Speght and Esther Sowerman.

Feminine Cosmologies

Whereas Milton’s Eve finds herself ensnared by Milton’s masculinist, discursive and hierarchical cosmos, monist philosopher Margaret Cavendish’s contemporaneous work draws on a materialist philosophy that foregrounds ontological interconnection and slippage between all created matter. Her cosmology in *The Blazing World* reveals what other modes of being might be possible for Eve were she not relegated to Milton’s reality, including a somewhat unexplained

theological intervention that supposes Eve could return to paradise. With *The Blazing World*, Cavendish “finally makes precisely the world she understood and expressed in her philosophical work”⁴³ and her world of fancy is “a place where every particle exercises a kind of free aesthetic self-determination.”⁴⁴ Published alongside her treatise *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*, Cavendish’s fictional prose narrative follows the Empress, a Lady from Earth who becomes a sovereign of the Blazing World, learning and governing the dimensions of this alternate universe. Interestingly, as the Empress investigates the dimensions of her new world, we learn that The Blazing World and the Imperial City called Paradise are one and the same as Adam and Eve’s.⁴⁵ John Rogers writes,

Cavendish identifies her alternative planet as that same Paradise from which "Adam fled" and which her heroine, one of the figures for the author herself, is "now Empress of." Neglecting in this account any mention of Adam's helpmeet, Cavendish invites our identification of the Empress with Eve, an Eve who in the powerfully utopian space of Cavendish's fictional and scientific writings has been left to govern Paradise alone.⁴⁶

Through this identification, Cavendish shares access to an Eden that is governed and negotiated on Eve’s terms. Additionally, this odd reveal opens up questions about the finality of the Fall from a feminine, or even feminist, perspective, with Cavendish ostensibly animating an Eden that is not-Fallen for Eve, or perhaps semi-Fallen given that Eve returns and resides there. This premise unlocks questions like, would Eve have Fallen if her experience of Eden was known to be a valid symbolic order? What does it mean that for Cavendish, Paradise looks so different than Milton’s Eden? Can this be attributed to gender difference? While I ask these questions in

order to set up the brief interweaving of worlds that follows, I posit that the Empress, with her instable gender, and the qualities of the Blazing World—particularly the categorizations of the populi and social and scientific organizational systems—is a realm that would be recognizable to Milton’s Eve. Spending some time in the Blazing World lets us imagine what possibilities exist for Eve outside of the masculinist symbolic that Milton has constituted her within.

Like Milton’s Eve, the Empress of the Blazing World, too, is attuned to and invested in horizontal organizational structures versus hierarchy, and it’s actually the remnants of earthly ways in her governance that causes strife there. The Blazing World “was very well and wisely governed”⁴⁷ before the Empress’s arrival. After her appointment as Empress, her first task was to take stock of the natural order of things, bringing in experts to answer her questions. We are initially introduced to the world as having “but one language in all that World: nor no more but one Emperor”⁴⁸ due to the unity principle that hinges the natural balance of the world. Yet, throughout the Empress’s reign, she gives credence to conflicting points of view, a practice clearly unaligned with the Blazing World’s natural order. For instance, in a scene where the Empress views different life forms through a telescope, two parties have a contesting view of their findings. At first, the Empress orders all telescopes to be smashed. When the parties plea for pardon, she “at last consented to their request, but upon condition, that their disputes and quarrels should remain within their Schools, and cause no factions or disturbances in State or Government.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, these divisions do cause a disturbance with the populus, and the Empress must “introduce the same form of Government again, which had been before; that is to have but one Sovereign, one Religion, one Law and one Language, so that all the World might be but as one united Family, without divisions.”⁵⁰ In this way, knowledge is spread across the institutions of the world, and offers some insight into Eve’s Eden, which, perhaps, looks more

similar to the dimensions of the Blazing World in that difference, including of opinion and knowledge, is not hierarchical, and is less important than the interconnectedness and one-ness of all beings.

In contrast to Milton's descriptions of Eden, Cavendish's paradise evinces more fluid separations between categories. Here, everything in "nature is but one Infinite self-moving, living and self-knowing body"⁵¹ with a less discernable hierarchy between forms. Additionally, where Milton and God ultimately make Eve (and Sin) Women through conception, Cavendish finds an alternative solution: in the Blazing World, there may not be human conception as Milton (and Milton's God) conceive of it. The Worm-men elucidate how creatures like themselves are created:

their production in general, answered they, is like the production of all other Natural Creatures, proceeding from the corporeal figurative motions of Nature; but as for their particular productions, they are according to the nature of their Species; some are produced out of flowers, some out of roots, some out of fruits, some out of ordinary Earth.⁵²

Concerned with the problem posed by Worm-spawn eating their parents, like flowers, the Worm-men assure the Empress, "their life, answered they, is their own and not their parents; for no part or creature of Nature can either give or take away life; but parts do onely assist and join with parts, either in the dissolution or production of other Parts and Creatures."⁵³ This may (hard may) track with Milton's conception of heavenly life and angels ("if Spirits embrace, / Total they mix" 8.626-7), but it greatly differs from the hard and fast divisions between classes in Eden: plant, then beast, then Eve then Adam. It does, however, give context to Eve's experience of Eden and her investment in tending the natural world around her, as perhaps she sees that she is made from

it as much as she is made from Adam, however much that conflicts with Milton's notions. Additionally, if Eve's actions are viewed through this indivisible quality between begetter and begotten, where parents are not superior, nor even truly different from their children, Eve's being takes on a sovereignty that Milton does not allow: her existence is enough to imbue her with will that cannot be separated from the will of God. Therefore, her actions at the Tree of Knowledge take on a different facet in that they are necessarily interconnected with God, and all beings—always already part of whole-time and whole-being, and in that way, impossible to isolate as feminine sin.

The Blazing World's amenability to these sorts of horizontal collapses shows up in the abundance of unranked species and creatures populating the world. While there are certainly categories, and like-types, it is characteristically through blending and overlapping that Cavendish's shapes take form. This includes many notable philosophic animal-people: "the Bear-men were to be her Experimental Philosophers, the Bird-men her Astronomers the Fly-Worm- and Fish-men her Natural Philosophers..." etc.⁵⁴ Eve as part plant (and part philosopher!) seamlessly fits in Cavendish's Paradise. If this is how Eve's world looks, it could be why Eve followed Satan and was beguiled—the scene of Milton's Fall then shows Eve, part plant, alone in this world of differentiated, hierarchical beings, finding another like herself, part-snake.

Along with these hybrids exist other types of animals, more similar to those we know, plants, and Men and Women. With these slippages between differences, gender-as-difference becomes constituted most clearly in the social realm rather than ontologically or through fixed material attributes. For Cavendish, within immaterial spirit there "was no difference of Sexes,"⁵⁵ which suggests sex-difference is temporarily fixed to corporeal bodies, which, as we know from the natural laws governing the Blazing World and in Cavendish's own philosophy, are always in

flux between other material forms. Additionally, the stability of embodied sex-difference is obscured and blurred in the Blazing World through the different type of reproduction that is spread across the material plane rather than fixed to specific forms.

As Rogers writes, “the identifiable differences in the intellectual department of men and women are often ascribed, as in [Cavendish’s epistles and prefaces], not to nature, but to society’s artificially inequitable system of liberties and constraints.”⁵⁶ In this way, Cavendish’s femininity is the Other against which masculinism defines itself, shown in the ways that Rogers details how Cavendish’s intellect and writing was demeaned in her time. However, in *The Blazing World*, Cavendish is able to define herself outside of a masculinist paradigm—the Emperor of this world only encourages, listens and shares his platform—and this stepping out of what is already defined is likely one reason this text reads as so eccentric in form, style and content. Outside of a masculinist paradigm, what is constituted as gendered for Cavendish, and by proxy the Empress and Duchess in the Blazing World, is reason and sense: it is the Empress’s specific faculties in this realm that are used to apprehend this world as it is, and this is a feminized way of knowing; the ability of the Empress to comprehend and govern the Blazing World is based in her feminized reason and sense.

This shows up in the text when the Empress decides to put her reason to use, emblemized in her “resolve to make a *Cabbala*.”⁵⁷ Under the advisement of a new character—the Duchess of Newcastle—the Empress decides she shall write a “poetical or romancical *Cabbala*.”⁵⁸ For Jennifer Park, the Empress’s desire to write this *Cabbala* illustrates a feminine relationship with temporality that “emphasiz[es] a blatant rewriting that prioritizes the new, and thus a replacement of the old rather than an integration of the old with the new.”⁵⁹ Park writes, “From her entrance into paradise, the Empress has already been constructive a new paradise

narrative.”⁶⁰ This is one way to understand the gendered aspect to the Empress’s imagination and hermeneutics. However, I see the Empress’s Cabbala, and the process of creating it within *The Blazing World*, as a site where Cavendish hones in on her feminine cosmology and offers up a divergent, resolutely feminine paradigm, complete with alternative, feminine epistemologies and ontologies.

Cavendish emphasizes that the Empress’s Cabbala is unable to be dictated to any of the well-known philosopher men of the time, as they would “scorn to be Scribes to a Woman.”⁶¹ Instead, the Duchess of Newcastle is invited to be the Empress’s scribe, suggesting that both due to social circumstances, but also, due to sexual difference in the realm of “Sense and Reason,”⁶² this Cabbala is only achievable through their collaboration. In the process of creating this Cabbala, the Duchess, too, becomes interested in creating a new world. The Empress encourages the Duchess to create a world in her mind, and after trying out many masculinist philosophies—Plato, Epicurus, Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes—the Duchess understands that she can only do so using Cavendish’s philosophical framework, and thus the Duchess’s world was “composed onely of the Rational”⁶³ as it is imbued with Cavendish’s philosophical mechanics. When the Empress’s soul wants to join the Duchess’s world, the Duchess implores her to make her own, encouraging that “your Majesty’s mind is full of rational corporeal motions; and the rational motions of my mind shall assist you.”⁶⁴

In these examples, Cavendish suggests that there is something that can be called a gendered difference—something that is unable to be grasped or translated by or through the masculine—but it is resolutely philosophical, not physical. The examples above draw out how Cavendish positions the feminine—knowledge, being, creation—as both unable to be discursively contained within a masculinist symbolic, similar to Milton’s Eve, as well as being

deeply aligned with reason—just a reason that does not exist inside the current masculinist paradigm. Further in her exploration of *The Blazing World*, Park writes that what “the Empress chooses to discuss...ha[s] no logical progression. Rather, the lack of structure allows for an unbounded exploration of issues.”⁶⁵ I might frame this differently. The Empress shows the possibilities of a world elaborated both materially and philosophically on her terms, and this might not read as “logical” after centuries of masculinist modernity, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t a type of logic. What Cavendish attributes to difference, and through the use of archetypes via proxies and doubles (the Empress as Eve, the Blazing World’s Duchess of Newcastle as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the Cabbala as *The Blazing World*), gender difference, is quite large in scope: it is a feminine cosmology. The framework and dynamics Cavendish puts forth in *The Blazing World* troubles the fixed status of womanhood and femininity by dislocating it from an easily read masculinist paradigm. Her cosmos offers possibilities for Eve that are unintelligible to John Milton because of his commitment to a masculinist interpretation of God’s order, which binds Eve within a subjective dimension that she would naturally displace. In this way, I show that Cavendish, the Empress and Eve are kindred, and the Blazing World might just be the realm that Eve has the ability to peer into—to see “another skie,” aflame with “none other but Blazing Stars.”⁶⁶

1. John Milton, “Paradise Lost” in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, rev. ed. John T. Shawcross (New York, 1971), 249-517. All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from this volume and will hereafter be cited parenthetically by book and line numbers.

2. Mary Nyquist, “The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity in the Divorce Tracts and in Paradise Lost” in *Re-Membering Milton: Essays On The Texts And Traditions*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York, 1987), 107

3. Nyquist, “The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity,” 106-7

4. Ibid., 114

5. Ibid., 115

6. I use the term subjectivation here to flag the co-constitutive nature of Eve’s subjectivity within Milton’s cosmology. Judith Butler explains the difference between subjection and subjectivation as “[subjection thinks of] power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order....But...following Foucault, [subjectivation] understands power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire.” Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, 1997), 2, emphasis in original.

7. Nyquist, “Gendered Subjectivity,” 120

8. Psychoanalytic feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray name the gendered quality of the “universal” symbolic order assumed by theorists like Freud and Lacan. In their view, language, image, law and structure is drawn *a priori* from a masculinist paradigm: including the Bible, this “phallogocentric,” masculinist symbolic order is named in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the Name of the Father. The ideas in this paper are entirely indebted to Kristeva and Irigaray’s critiques, as understanding the masculinist symbolic as such opens up possibilities for feminist systems of meaning (like semiotics for Kristeva) that are un-linked from, or at least purposefully in tension with, a masculinist symbolic order. However, my deployment of this theoretical framework is refracted through a trans and queer feminist lens that necessarily uncouples

prescribed embodied characteristics from the possibility of a feminine symbolic. For further discussion on Kristeva and Irigaray, see: Elizabeth Gross, "Philosophy, Subjectivity and the Body: Kristeva and Irigaray," in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, ed. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross (Boston 1987), 125-43

9. Melissa E. Sanchez, "Milton's Genderqueer Christianity," *Milton Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, (Pittsburgh, 2020), 312

10. Though it is not only a love framework that moves gender to the periphery. Christopher Koester argues that Eve's difference is related to reason and intellect in that Eve is "perfectly different," whereas "God is too different...God's difference is extrarational; the creatures' difference is irrational; Adam and Eve's difference, meanwhile, is perfectly rational."

Christopher Koester, "Solitude and Difference in Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies*, vol. 57 (Pittsburgh, 2016), 165

11. Ayelet C. Langer, "Milton's Aristotelian Transformations in the Representation of Regenerative Change," *Modern Philology*, vol. 118, no. 3 (2021), 400

12. Karen L. Edwards, "Learning and Loving in *Paradise Lost*," vol. 62, no. 2 (Pittsburgh, 2020), 243

13. Joshua Held, "Eve's 'paradise within' in *Paradise Lost*: A Stoic Mind, a Love Sonnet, and a Good Conscience," *Studies in Philology*, vol. 114, no. 1 (2017), 173

14. Held, "Eve's 'paradise within,'" 178

15. Edwards, "Learning and Loving," 249

16. Nor in our own: while in the midst of writing, Lil Nas X released a music video wherein the young Black queer artist envisions himself as and enacts all beings in the Garden of Eden, Heaven and Hell. Nas X's imagination of a monist, highly femme and erotic cosmos gorgeously

reaffirms my arguments here and I highly recommend his video as an accompanying piece to this paper. Lil Nas X, "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)," March 25th, 2020, Video, YouTube.

<https://youtu.be/6swmTBVI83k>

17. Nyquist, "Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity," 100

18. Sanchez, "Genderqueer Christianity," 315-16

19. Koester, "Solitude and Difference," 175

20. Diane Kelsey McColley, "Eve and the Arts of Eden," in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana, 1988), 102

21. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of JM*, 325.29

22. Diane Kelsey McColley, "Milton's Environmental Epic: Creature Kinship and the Language of Paradise Lost," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed.

Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville, 2001), 63

23. Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York, 2009), 182

24. Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 192

25. *Ibid.*, 193

26. Elspeth Graham, "'Vain Desire,' 'Perverseness' and 'Love's Proper Hue': Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Interest in Paradise Lost." *Critical Survey*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1992), 134

27. Graham, "'Vain Desire,'" 136

28. *Ibid.*, 138

29. Kent R. Lehnhof, "Performing Masculinity in Paradise Lost." *Milton Studies* vol. 50 (Pittsburgh, 2009), 57-8

30. Sadly for Lehnhof, effeminating is not a word.

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31. John Guillory, "Milton, Narcissism, Gender: On the Genealogy of Male Self-Esteem" in *Critical Essays on John Milton*, ed. Christopher Kendrick and G. K. Hall (New York, London 1995), 194
32. Lehnhof, "Performing Masculinity," 73
33. Ibid., 70
34. Sara Ahmed, "Woman," in *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (New York, 2010), 92
35. Graham, "Vain Desire," 133
36. For a deeper look at the allegorical connections between Milton's Eve and classical and historical figures, see: James Nohrnberg, "Naming Milton's Eve," *Milton Studies*, vol. 60, no. 1 (Pittsburgh, 2018), 1-28
37. Shannon Miller, "Serpentine Eve: Milton and the Seventeenth-Century Debate Over Women," *Milton Quarterly* vol. 42.1 (2008), 60
38. Held, "Eve's 'paradise within,'" 172, quotes in original.
39. Ibid., 173
40. Ibid., 185
41. Miller, "Serpentine Eve," 62
42. Ibid., 56
43. Stephen Hequembourg, "The Poetics of Materialism in Cavendish and Milton," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 54, No. 1 (2014), 178
44. Ibid., 180

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45. Cavendish, Margaret. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princesse, the Duchess of Newcastle* (London, 1668)
72. <http://www.proquest.com/docview/2240946225/citation/CC9A510B32AB4592PQ/1>.
46. John Rogers, *Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, 1996), 178
47. Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 120
48. Ibid., 10
49. Ibid., 28
50. Ibid., 121
51. Ibid., 80
52. Ibid., 46
53. Ibid., 46
54. Ibid., 15
55. Ibid., 102
56. Rogers, *Matter of Revolution*, 182
57. Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 92, emphasis in original.
58. Ibid.
59. Jennifer Mi-Young Park, "Navigating Past, Potential, and Paradise: The Gendered Epistemologies of Discovery and Creation in Francis Godwin's 'Man in the Moone' and Margaret Cavendish's 'Blazing World' in *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2012), 130
60. Ibid., 133
61. Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 89

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 100

64. Ibid., 101

65. Park, "Navigating Past," 13

66. Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 22