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Milton’s Paradoxical Eve in *Paradise Lost*

It is difficult to define historical authors using modern terminology, for the ideologies and perspectives which exist now simply did not exist centuries ago, yet there are merits in analyzing historical works in this fashion. Upon first reading John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one might wonder at his intentions in writing such a controversial narrative, especially in regard to Eve and her role as “woman.” Unlike the traditional story of the Creation and the Fall found in the Judeo-Christian Bible (which quickly glances over Eve’s role), Milton elaborates on Eve’s character and reveals her seemingly paradoxical nature; she is independent, yet submissive; intelligent, yet humble; curious, yet grounded; free spirited, yet responsible. By the end of Milton’s epic poem, readers are left with a blurry understanding of where Milton stands on feminist issues – is Eve supposed to be a radical feminist icon, representing female independence and inherit virtue? Or, is Milton simply reiterating the previously established anti-feminist rhetoric that depicts female nature as inherently inferior, even sinful? There are many feminist critics who lean both ways on this issue, but there is substantially more support for the former theory, defining Milton as a feminist. In order to understand what it really means to label Milton a “feminist,” one must understand the term feminism itself and then apply that knowledge to not only *Paradise Lost* as an independent work, but also to Milton’s intentions behind it.

The definition of feminism is murky with a large range of interpretations, but the term itself was coined relatively recently, around the mid-to-late-19th century; however, literary historians find evidence of feminist ideologies within some earlier authors’ works. Feminism can be classified within a variety of groups: liberal, radical, poststructural, and psychoanalytical, to name a few. Sian Hawthorne, who wrote a section within the *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender* titled, “Western Feminism,” details the development of these various feminist ideologies within Western culture, specifically in England and post-colonial America. Hawthorne defines the first wave of feminism as “liberal feminism,” which is “committed to the full equality of women and men,” but which does not deny the traditional notion of gender-based qualities (541). Instead, liberal feminists believe that there are inherent differences between men and women, but claim that these differences do not imply superiority or inferiority; rather, these differences are meant to be complementary. Another feminist critic states that liberal feminism originated in the “British theory about equality and entitlement to opportunity for self-development,” (Black 45) concepts which were central to the Enlightenment mentality familiar to Milton. Furthermore, from the liberal feminist perspective, “education and civil liberties were the remedies for the disadvantages of women” as they would be for any individual, a concept an educated poet like Milton surely agreed with. Only the many various classifications of feminism, most fall under one of two main categories of ideology: those who believe in gender-based characteristics and virtues which separate women from men, but which do not place them in a position of subordination; and those who believe in the complete equality of men and women, arguing that there are no gender-based differences between the two. It is no surprise that “nearly all historic feminists are assigned to this first category,” (Black 45) considering the long-existing narrative which distills the idea of feminine and masculine traits. To some, this perspective may be seen as simply reiterating the traditional anti-feminist rhetoric; however, instead of defining feminine traits as inferior and masculine traits as superior, feminists of this ideology believe these gender-based traits are meant to complement one another, arguing that what one lacks the other possesses, therefore creating balance and equality. But there are still some critics who argue that perspectives like this, which are “based on female values,” are themselves “conservative,” and reveal an internalized “acceptance of self-limitations that crippled from the start any project of social change,” (Black 31,34).

Historically, there is an abundance of anti-feminist rhetoric found across various cultures, especially so in Western societies where Orthodox Catholicism has depicted women as subservient to men for centuries. This traditional belief in the divine superiority of men originates in a number of sources, one of which being the creation story of Christianity. Told within the New King James Version of *The Holy Bible*, “the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” (Gen. 2:7) creating the first human being to exist, Adam. From Adam, God “took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place,” and from this rib he made a woman so that Adam could have a “helper comparable” among the other bestial residents of Eden. He presented Eve to Adam so that he could name her, as he did with “every beast of the field and every bird of the air,” and Adam called her “Woman, because she was taken out of Man,” (Gen. 2:19,23). Together, Adam and Eve resided in the garden of Eden, a paradise, where they enjoyed the luxuries of immortality and abundance. Within the garden they were given one commandment from God: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die,” (Gen. 2:16-7). However, Satan, disguised as a serpent, the “more cunning than any beast of the field,” comes upon Eve and persuades her to defy God, her creator, and eat from the tree, tempting her with the promise of godly knowledge. When Eve first “took of its fruit and ate,” she also “gave to her husband with her, and he ate,” condemning them both to God’s divine retribution (Gen. 3:6). Eve is “traditionally seen as the tempter of Adam” and is depicted as the embodiment of weakness and sin, first “having been tempted by Satan to eat of the fruit” then in turn tempting Adam, leading to the exile of mankind from paradise (Thorley 2).

This representation of Eve within the traditional biblical narrative is described by feminist critics as misogynistic and many believe that this traditional “interpretation of Eve’s responsibility for the fall,” often leads to the justification of female subjugation within patriarchal societies (Thorley 3). For such a relatively short story, its influence is unimaginable. The entirety of this story, of their creation and subsequent fall, consists of only 50 verses within a text which encompasses a total of 31,102 verses (roughly, depending on specific translations); yet this “widely accepted interpretation” has been “a main factor in many of the gender equality issues for centuries,” (Thorley 2).

It is this controversial story that John Milton decided to elaborate on in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Within Milton’s adaptation he expands upon the characters of Adam and Eve, developing them into more tangible and three-dimensional characters than their biblical representations. Milton’s work goes into incredible detail about the instances surrounding their creation and fall from paradise, utilizing his literary skills to reveal the story from various perspectives, including Eve’s, a radical decision on Milton’s part. However, his representation of Eve in *Paradise Lost* has been highly controversial, especially within the feminist narrative, where critics argue over Milton’s true intentions in his representation of Eve. While some critics view his work as anti-feminist in its stereotypical depiction and objectification of Eve, others view it as praising feminine virtue and advocating for women’s independence.

His story creates a mixture of classical Greek mythology and his own individualistic interpretation of the Bible, revealing his intimate studies of literature and ancient cultures. Milton dedicated a great deal of his youth to studying, attending Cambridge for seven years only to afterwards retreat “to his father’s house in the countryside for five more years of isolated, self-directed study,” (Rosen). His love for reading and self-improvement through education led him to often study late into the night, reading strictly by candlelight for an accumulation of years; Milton himself recalls that from the age of twelve, “scarcely ever did I leave my studies for my bed before the hour of midnight,” (qtd. in Rosen). Unfortunately, his studious youth laid “the foundation for vast erudition” and ultimately led to complete blindness later in life (Rosen). By the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*, he was not only completely blind but had also witnessed a life of strife and misfortune: from the religious and political persecution he feared during the English Restoration to the loss of multiple wives and children.

Milton’s studious nature ultimately led him into the world of religion and politics, which, at the time, often went hand in hand. Having learned at an early age to read Hebrew, he began to read “the Hebrew Bible in the original,” which helped “radicalize his Christian beliefs… toward Puritanism, attracted by its idea that the Bible was the ultimate authority and trumped all institutional hierarchies,” (Rosen). With this religious theology he justified his support of and involvement in the beheading of the English monarch and head of the Anglican Church, Charles I. The death of the monarchy and shift in the political system was “for many a time of terrifying anarchy,” but for Milton was “a great religious reckoning,” (Rosen). However, the new government he reveled in soon took a turn for the worst with the return of Charles II and the beginning of the English Restoration. During the Restoration, once the monarchy was restored with Charles II on the throne, those who had “abetted and defended the killing” of the previous monarch, Charles I, “were hanged, drawn, and quartered,” including a number of Milton’s friends and colleagues, a gruesome fate he too would have faced had it not been for his political connections (Rosen).

Milton not only suffered political strife but personal hardships as well, both of which need to be understood when analyzing his work from a feminist perspective. Specifically, Milton had many misfortunes when it came to marriage, which appear to have influenced his representation of Adam and Eve’s marital relationship. Milton was married to two women throughout his life, both of whom died followed shortly by their children. The first, Mary Powell (only seventeen) left Milton (then thirty-three) to return to her parents “just a few months after the wedding” for unknown reasons, only to return and die in childbirth years later (Rosen). Mary’s death especially is described as having a profound affect on Milton, especially considering that “in the year of Mary’s death Milton’s blindness became total,” and soon after he faced the “total collapse of his political-theological hopes,” (Rosen). Understandably, his experience with love and marriage inevitably influenced his views concerning marriage, shifting them away from his previously held Puritan ideals of the submissive wife. Milton’s depiction of Eve in *Paradise Lost* instead, “neglects the Puritanistic ideals of wifely duties by not supporting and following her husband Adam throughout their experience in the Garden of Eden,” (Thorley 1).

At first glance, Milton seems to reiterate “patriarchal ideas about Eve’s secondariness, inequality, inferiority, and subjection to Adam,” (Tanimoto 79) through a number of ways, aligning with the established notions of feminine subjugation found in Genesis. Within *Paradise Lost*, Milton parallels the Bible’s depiction of Adam as ultimate ruler and authority of Eden in his role of naming all the creatures that God brings before him, including Eve: “I now see / Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, my self / Before me; woman is her name, of man / Extracted,” (180; bk VIII, 494-7). These words are almost identical to those found in Genesis, implying that Milton is reinforcing Adam’s superiority over Eve. However, Milton rectifies any possible misunderstanding when Eve later declares “O flow’rs, / . . . which I bred up with tender hand / From the first op’ning bud, and gave ye names,” (254; bk XI, 273 -77) revealing that she too exercises the “power of naming,” (Wittreich 99).

Among other historical figures, Milton’s ideology revealed in *Paradise Lost* falls within the earlier category of feminism, meaning that he believes the gender are inherently different but neither should be deemed superior or inferior. He reveals this through his representation of Eve’s characteristics and her relationships within the narrative. Her characteristics are gender-based, polar opposite to Adams, but they are meant to complement his own rather than put her in a place of subjugation; man and woman were “created by the God to have different virtues so that they can help each other, compensating for each other’s weaknesses with each other’s virtues,” (Tanimoto 83). She displays both positive and negative qualities found throughout traditionally anti-feminist rhetoric; however, Milton does not define Eve this way in an attempt to undermine her character, but rather build her up as an individual person independent of Adam and capable of her own choices. Milton also reveals the complexities of equality within the garden, pointing out how Eve is often placed underneath men (Adam, Satan and God), but at the same time she holds a certain power over them (or she stands on more equal footing, because like God and Adam she too is a “creator”).

Milton’s restoration and reimagination of the story of Adam and Eve reveals “the timidity of Milton’s feminism, but feminism nonetheless,” (Wittreich 97). There are many feminist critics who will continue to view Milton’s depiction of Eve as misogynistic; Virginia Woolf called him “the first of the masculinists,” and Mary Wollstonecraft saw Eve as “one of the masculine stereotypes of female nature,” reinforcing the gender-based stereotypes utilized in anti-feminist rhetoric to subjugate women (qtd. in Rosen). However, this was not really Milton’s objective. By restating the traditional anti-feminist notions of gender-based differences in physicality, morality and intelligent, Milton creates a work in which “speech after speech the clichés of Christianity are embedded so that they may be challenged… riddled with contradictions carefully planted… that are evidence of sophisticated artistic strategy, not of defective artistry,” (Wittreich 85). Analyzing Milton’s work through the liberal feminist lens and keeping in mind his personal experiences regarding women, his true intentions appear – human nature, regardless of gender, is about finding and balancing “divine purpose and individual autonomy,” (Rosen).

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