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The Hidden Woman in *Paradise Lost* by John Milton

Those familiar with the story of Adam and Eve from the Bible usually view Eve as the epitome of sin since she is the first transgressor. This perspective often induces anti-feminist sentiments that people claim are supported by their religion. An interpretation of Genesis is that God created the genders as equals and only mandated male superiority after Eve's transgression. However, in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton describes Eve's inferiority to be present from the beginning of her creation. This inferiority is supported by one version of the creation story that illustrates Eve as being created from Adam instead of from the dust, which makes her obedient to both God and Adam. Milton may have chosen this version to be able to express his viewpoints on female mediocrity, but this choice also allows him to explore gender roles without the shadow of Eve's sin already prompting readers' bias. Although on the surface Milton's portrayal of gender may seem anti-feminist, a closer look at Milton's gendering of concrete and abstract concepts, especially Reason, reveals a more feminist perspective with Eve possessing an equal, if not superior intellect than Adam.

The inequality of the sexes was made apparent from their first appearance in *Paradise Lost* when Satan notes that due to their sex the two first humans, "not equal seemed" (4.296). The word "seemed" in this line is significant, as it immediately intimates the uncertain validity of the inequality. Satan continues to observe that "For contemplation he and valor formed, / For

softness she and sweet attractive grace” (4.297-298). This paints a picture of Eve as nurturing, which is suitable for the mother of creation.

To further the image of a nurturing female, Milton genders many inhuman entities as female, including Paradise, Nature, Hell, and the ethereal mold. The Garden of Eden, or Paradise is established as female when given the pronoun “her”: “Eden stretched her line” (4.210) as well as Nature: “The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave” (2.911). As Eden and Nature represent the growth and nurture of living things, females represent bearers of life. Life cannot sustain without females, which gives the sex a greater value than one that is simply existing so Adam is not lonely. Hell, which is also given the pronoun “her” does not usually suggest a nurturing place. However, it is gendered female when Belial is trying to convince his fellow fallen angels to remain at peace with God and to see Hell as a refuge. Therefore, the feminine pronoun generates an atmosphere of wellbeing and potential for growth. The ethereal mold, which is a “heavenly substance, derived from ‘ether’, the fifth and purest element, thought to be incorruptible” (Greenblatt et. al 822n2), was also gendered female when Belial was describing Heaven’s impenetrability. This image of a female as pure and incorruptible directly contrasts Eve’s actual actions in giving in to Satan’s temptation. Perhaps this is Milton comparing what a female should be or how God intended her to what she ended up being in reality. Or perhaps Milton is simply adding another layer of ambiguity to the complex nature of Eve’s supposed inferiority.

Arguably the most significant gendered entity is the abstract concept of Reason. Not only is Reason gendered female, Reason is entertained as a substitute for Eve:

But God left free the will, for what obeys

Reason, is free, and reason he made right,

But bid her well beware, and still erect,

Lest by some fair appearing good surprised

She dictate false, and misinform the will

To do what God expressly hath forbid. (*Paradise Lost* 9.351-356)

Adam's continued story of what happens to personified Reason directly parallels Eve's reality:

"Since Reason may meet / [...] the foe / And fall into deception unaware, / Not keeping strictest watch, as she was warned" (9.360-63). "Reason" and "she" could easily be replaced with "Eve,"

making them one and the same. This is ironic, as Adam is portrayed as the one who is more rational and the one who Satan avoids because of Adam's "higher intellectual" status (9.483).

While Adam was made for contemplation, Eve is illustrated as one who is easily tempted and devoid of reason.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Eve is depicted as one strongly influenced by vanity, intimating that her sex is less intelligent than males. When Eve tells the story of her own creation, she says that she became enraptured with her own reflection that she found in a pool of water. As she was just created, she did not know that what she saw was actually herself, so it is not technically narcissism. The voice of God called her away from her own image, but even after seeing Adam, she still wished to return to her reflection. She saw something in herself that she did not see in Adam. She claimed that Adam was "Less winning soft, less amiably mind" (4.479), but perhaps she simply wanted to know her own identity. Unlike Adam, Eve always sought knowledge, as exemplified when she asked about the world she lived in: "But wherefore all night long shine these, for whom / This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?"

(4.657-58). Rather than being prone to vanity, Eve is simply drawn to Reason, which has already been established as herself. When Satan is trying to tempt Eve to eat the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, he first appeals to her supposed vanity, showering her with flattery such as, “Fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair, / Thee all things living gaze on, all things thine / By gift, and thy celestial beauty adore” (9.538-40). While she is polite to the talking serpent and, as always, curious about that which she is not aware, she is more responsive when Satan begins talking reasonably. The serpent provides himself as a reference, as he ate the apple and is not dead, and why should a snake be allowed more opportunities than God’s most prized creations? He also says that, “if what is evil / Be real, why not known, since easier shunned? / God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just” (9.698-700). If God does not want Adam and Eve to know good and evil, it is only to keep them from becoming “as gods” (9.708). This appeal to Eve’s pursuit of knowledge and reason is what wins her over and leads her to eat the apple.

Milton portrays Satan as intelligent, as he must be as an effective temptor, and therefore temptress Eve is just as intelligent by comparison. When Eve proposed they split up, Adam warns her not to underestimate Satan as, “Subtle he needs must be, who could seduce / Angels” (9.307-08). If Satan was not as effective a temptor, he would not be a worthy foe. After Eve eats the forbidden apple, she easily tempts Adam to join her in her sin. She holds all the power over him, rather than God. Although Adam does not primarily respond to Eve’s intelligence, but rather eats the apple out of love and fear of losing his wife; Eve taking on the role of temptor implies intelligence and an understanding of human nature, which applies reason.

While Eve’s downfall is due to her response to reason, Adam’s transgression is a result of his reliance on the more irrational emotion, directly in contrast to their preconceived roles. He

eats the apple out of fear of losing Eve: “How can I live without thee, how forgo / Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined” (9.908-9). This sin of eating the apple came from internal and selfish motivations. God forgives humans because they are tempted by Satan, who is an external force. God cannot forgive Satan and his fellow fallen angels because sin came from within themselves. One could argue that Adam’s internal motivation to sin could make his acquiescence more unforgivable than Eve’s. One could also counter-argue that Eve tempted Adam, making him externally motivated. However, Eve came out of Adam just as Sin, who is gendered and personified as a living female, came out of Satan’s head. This makes Sin herself an external force like Eve is to Adam. Nonetheless, Sin as an external force is reduced to Satan’s own internal temptation, which means it is necessary to do the same for Eve. If this doctrine of internal and external motivation is followed, Adam is unforgivable in the sight of God whereas Eve was externally motivated and therefore can be pardoned.

Despite Milton’s seeming beliefs about women’s inferiority, a close reading of the application of gender in *Paradise Lost* reveals an Eve that is intelligent, decisive, and a pursuer of knowledge. This perspective of Eve belongs to what is often referred to as a “modern” feminist viewpoint, even though these mindsets could be found at least throughout the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, the latter to which Milton belonged. However, Milton was still a product of a misogynistic society, which may have influenced the apparent portrayal of women as narcissistic and shallow. Still, he may have desired a deeper interpretation of his surface meaning to understand the true value of women underneath society’s overbearing perspectives of women as inferior and weaker.

Works Cited

*Paradise Lost*. 2nd ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. V. 1 Ed Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W.W. Norton. 2013. Pp. 801-929.