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The Invisible Woman: Eve's Self Image in *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

This article is a feminist, deconstructive analysis of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Taking the perspective of the story's main female character—Eve—the article seeks to understand how gender affects interpretation and how Milton's interpretation of the old biblical story hints at some of the problems of gender roles and "institutionalized misogyny" that are so much a part of our Western tradition. Milton's Eve has been created from a man, subjected to his rule, and punished for her alleged inferiority. She has been placed in a world that is not her own, her intellectual powers limited, her ability to define herself and her world prevented. Hers is an existence defined by men, and this is a paper dedicated to understanding her perspective—the female perspective. Is she the foil that tradition says she is? Or is she the hero, the first great seeker of knowledge?

Let's talk about sex—about the gulf between the feminine and the masculine, about the ways the sexes work and the ways they help to shape perceptions. How is a man's world any different from a woman's? Focusing on thought and interpretation, an undeniable otherness comes to clarity, revealing one of life's first oppositions—the male and the female. This paper doesn't seek to examine the biological differences; instead, the purpose is to briefly examine socially constructed gender roles and the role they play in literary interpretation, specifically in classical literature. The examination is meant to pose crucial questions and stimulate discourse.

Firmly rooted in the Western tradition of literature is the biblical story of Adam and Eve. This widely recognizable story is a keystone work, part of the system of thought and belief, an episteme. The infamous bite in a utopian garden, taken by lips feminine, has been said to be the root of all of our woe; has been inextricably planted in our culture and in our ways of understanding sex and gender roles. It is a story of power and where it comes from and how it is to be distributed. That Western tradition has seen many attempts to flesh out this short section on the Old Testament book of Genesis is a fact; that none have achieved the notoriety and esteem of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is more fact. *Paradise Lost* is a fictional work of alleged fact: pagan and poetic and prophetic. In his epic rendition of the old tale, Milton further complicates sex and gender roles, filling in the gaps with reason and with the inescapable touches of patriarchy and misogyny that have shaped and are still shaping Western culture. The language, the imagery, the religious claims—all conjured in a male mind. But what about the female reader? How does she interpret a work like this? How does she determine the meaning? For the male reader, this is a story of affirmation, a story of authoritarian origins. Milton's elaboration of the story of Genesis brings attention to the topic of female subjugation and creates a view of women that has an unmistakably inherent male bias. For the female reader (and the careful male reader), this bias and the way it creates meaning challenge the traditional interpretation, forcing readers to consider some tough questions about the sexes.

Through the eyes of the epic poem's only major female character, the problem of image makes itself known. How she comes to interpret herself and the world around her is centered on a male-dominated ideology, brought to life by a male—a dominant literary male—in a field of male-dominated tradition. Given these circumstances, Eve can't see herself for herself; she becomes the problematic signifier, the allegorical figure that brings the problem of image to the forefront of discourse. Hers is a definition of self that comes from a male, an understanding of self framed in and by masculinity.

One of the very first things that the Bible makes concrete, and that Milton's rendition of the Genesis account most certainly builds on, is the idea that females were created from the rib of a man, specifically from the left-hand side of a man—a side notorious for evil. The Judeo-Christian God of the first Genesis account creates his male and female and tells them to prosper in Gen. 1:27 (Revised Standard Version). The second account in Gen. 2:23, is where God brings forth the woman from the man, *from* his rib, Adam naming her woman because she came *from* him, *from* his image. Eve is thus twice removed from God. Out of Adam's loneliness, she was thus created. Milton takes the idea and elaborates on it. Noticing the pairs of the other animals of creation, Milton's Adam comments to God, saying: "So fitly them in pairs thou hast combin'd" (Milton, 1674, 8:394). Adam seems to sense an "imperfection" in man (Milton, 1674, 8:423), an incompleteness in his being, a problem that can be corrected by the creation of another being—a significant other. He senses that the world that was created for *him* isn't ordered right: Adam needs a companion. He then asks his creator, "Among unequals what society/Can sort, what harmonie or true delight?" (Milton, 1674, 8:383-84). He asks, and he receives. Formed and fashioned from his rib, Eve, a creature "Manlike, but different sex, so lovely faire" (Milton, 1674, 8:470), came to be. This account has a great impact on the way that Milton's Eve sees herself and her or rather his (Adam's) world. She was created *from* Adam and *for* Adam. Hers is a man's world, a world fashioned for men by a father-figure type God—a great ladder of patriarchy. She recognizes her secondary status, her inferiority to Adam, her duty to look to him as her "Guide and Head."

In her account of creation, Eve is interrupted from her first frolic in the new world by the cosmic voice of masculinity, urging her out of the symbolism of shadows and the vanity of her reflected image in the water and into the arms of Adam, her new master, the holder of "manly grace," a quality superior to beauty. Her reflected image, the first recognition of the self, is presented to the reader as an action filled with "vain desire" (Milton, 1674, 4:466). She looks at her form in the pool and is pleased by what she sees, curious about the new being that is staring back at her. But the charged words of the narrative foreshadow Eve's predisposition to loving an image above that which created it. With these, her "submissive charms," coupled with her attractive graces, God answers Adam's loneliness, and helps to spur the fruitfulness of the world, the spreading of the seeds of humanity, all the while hinting that her preoccupation with the exterior beauty will lead to future problems. For the female reader, Eve seems to be a novelty for Adam. She is relegated to a role of inferiority in the male hierarchy, and this is the point from which she perceives herself and the world, a perception that began with her taking notice of her physical appearance (Milton, 1674, 4:461), a perception of herself that concentrates on her features and later recognizes the limits of

her inner dimensions, her intellect. It's a good thing that Milton's God warned her of loving herself, her image too much, coaxing her away from her reflection, which after all is just a distortion of reality.

Eve can't imagine, is even prevented from imagining, herself outside of the eyes of the supernatural patriarch and his man Adam and the textual trappings of Milton; she is a woman thrice removed from the female perspective—a problem for female readers, which then becomes the male reader's problem. The female reader of *Paradise Lost* will sense this not so subtle subversion of female gender, this subtle poetic use of language that surfaces long-held assumptions about women and long-held traditions of power. Her self image is a masculine one, or at least one that needs to be defined by masculinity, by the tradition of institutionalized misogyny.

The misogynic nature of the old Christian story that Milton builds on creates a separation between the sexes: it is the earthly myth that obscures the views of the two worlds—the male and the female—coming between their orbits of understanding. The old episteme becomes the scope that Eve uses to place value on herself, through which she shapes her values. The feminist Fetterly's notion of the old "Consciousness-is-Power" maxim holds true in the character of Eve. Her consciousness is limited, her idea of self is not self-determined, her power of perception and literary psychology, both are always on the periphery of male-dominated ideology—the phallogocentric ideology—both are in the unfocused background of the big picture, the male picture.

The astute female reader, focusing on Milton's representation of Eve, will no doubt be embittered at times. Eve's beauty, her most esteemed trait, "Heav'n's last best gift" (Milton, 1674, 5:19), is transformed by Milton into a weapon, shooting "Darts of desire" (Milton, 1674, 8:563); the reader in general is constantly made aware of Eve being naked, her delectable fruits showing, and how she frolics, innocently, in her own nakedness. Eve represents a kind of simplistic, dangerously delectable creature, whose very delectability is dangerous to Paradise. Her strengths leave her vulnerable. The female reader might behold in Milton's descriptions of Eve the sensual imagery and the pleasure-filled vocabulary: "more lovely faire/Then Wood-Nymph" (Milton, 1674, 5:381); she inspires "amorous delight" (Milton, 1674, 8:476) for Adam; and her "Ornaments, in outward shew/Elaborate, of inward less intact" (Milton, 1674, 8:539-40)—all ornamentation, all inwardly flawed.

Adam's views are also problematic for the female reader. His dialogue throughout the poem is riddled with misogynistic remarks. In his account of his creation, he recounts to the angel Raphael:

For well I understand in the prime end
Of Nature her th'inferiour, in the mind
And inward Faculties, which most excel,
In outward also her resembling less
His Image who made both, and less expressing
The character of that Dominion giv'n
O're other creatures (Milton, 1674, 8:540-47)

In the actual biblical account, Adam isn't so vocal. So what's Milton's point? Why have the "Patriarch of mankind" so chauvinistic, so full of himself? Adam is fine with Eve's ornamentation when it comes time to light her "bridal lamp," when it comes time for "amorous play." But he's quick to point out that Eve is less of the image of God

than himself, and he's even quicker to place the blame on Eve after the fruit is eaten. God himself admonishes Adam for having "resigned thy manhood" to a woman, when his (Adam's) "perfection farr excell'd/Hers in all real dignitie" (Milton, 1674, 10:628). Milton scholar Flanagan commented that "Adam's perfection outranks Eve's in the hierarchy of nature ... he resigns his manhood and violates his position in nature ..." (Flanagan, 1998, p. 628). Adam's guilty of having given up his "God-given authority" to his inferior: "Was shee thy God, that thou didst obey" (Milton, 1674, 10:145).

While Adam is busy cowering and distributing blame, covering himself with a metaphorical fig leaf, Eve is officially on the Biblical record as being a subordinate: "... to thy Husband's will/Thine shall submit, hee over thee shall rule" (Milton, 1674, 10:196-97). But this is all just Biblical ornamentation: she was already the inferior, the property of Adam, the intellectually challenged flaw of humanity—or so the story goes. This is the woe-making event, the great documentation and dictation of gender roles. This is the event that culminates into what feminist Gilbert calls "institutionalized and often elaborately metaphorical misogyny" (Gallagher & Gilbert, 1979, p. 321). Eve, the "fair defect/Of Nature" (Milton, 1674, 10:891), thus takes the brunt of the blame, whereas Adam's punishment—to be the head of household, ruler of his woman—comes across to readers as getting off easy. Hers is a kind of domestic slavery, a hard-handed punishment that includes pain in childbirth. She is to be the homemaker, the caretaker of issues domestic; he's to be the breadwinner, whose toiled and sweaty brow will return back to the dust from which it came—God's division of labor, his dictation of the structure of how things should be—the origins of Christian patriarchy—the origin of gender roles.

From the feminist perspective, this "Original Sin" is the root of all women's woe—but not in the same sense as the masculine view would see it. The feminist Showalter refers to women as being "daughters of the male tradition," those who've been indoctrinated and have accepted the dominant male ideology (Showalter, 1979). For women the question of how to critically look at the themes of patriarchy and misogyny in the work of a canonical literary giant—Milton—might seem a bit intimidating. But the work speaks for itself, is itself evidence. What male critics would view as an attack, female critics would view as revealing the latent implications of Milton's work. So, for the sake of continuing discourse, let's realize the fictional nature of *Paradise Lost*, no matter how much it begs to be read as being from a "Divine authority."

Milton's fictional God created hierarchy, created worlds and beings whose primary flaws were refusal to acknowledge the system of authority. Eve was created to be Adam's helper, his *unequal* companion. She can only form her ideas through his ideas, saying to him: "My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst/Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains, /God is thy Law, thou mine ..." (Milton, 1674, 4:636-38). Adam is her interpreter, her Heavenly filter. Eve is born into subjection, created less equal and inferior to her "Guide and Head." She appears to have been set up, inclined to want more, to be equal to her male partner—all things that might have fed her desire to know, to eat of the fruit, thus making her equal if not higher to the males who control her. She basically might've wanted to venture higher than her lot, an inexact reference to the Miltonian Satan's words. Eve shows the readers that she is the first human to have wisdom as a virtue, the first to truly want to know, even in spite of Milton's

attempts to taint her language, writing about her "rash hands in evil hour" (Milton, 1674, 9:780), hands that reached for the forbidden fruit; despite her thoughts not being far from God-head; and despite her "ignoring without restraint" (Milton, 1674, 9:791) the fruit of temptation. Without her, God's plan couldn't work; free will wouldn't have been exercised. True, she is given the role "Mother of the Human Race" and mother of the seed that will bruise the head of the serpent; however, the scale is tipped to emphasize her wrongdoing, her wanting to know, to be equal or surpass.

The epic and the story that preceded it are firmly rooted in Western culture, and to pluck of the fruits of discourse, one must be willing to engage both sides of the story, both perspectives, both male and female. The former is the traditional, the accepted interpretation; the latter is less explored. The way that Milton's Eve takes in her world and interprets it and acts in it is an old link in a chain of "immascultation," a Fetterly term. By realizing that this original woman is written from a male's point of view in a patriarchal mythological narrative that favors men and by not being afraid to ask questions about sexual polarity in the work, we as readers and critics can taste the fruits of debate—no matter how bitter they may be.

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